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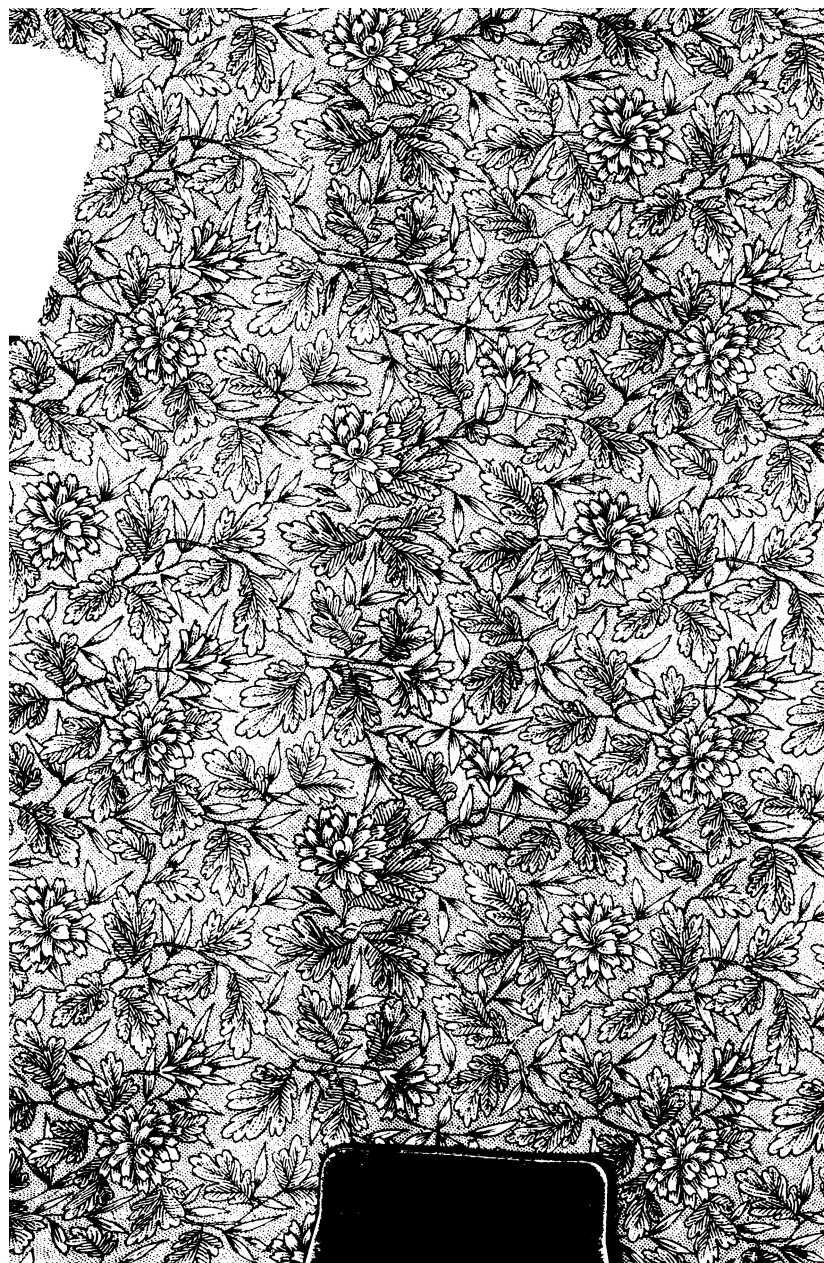
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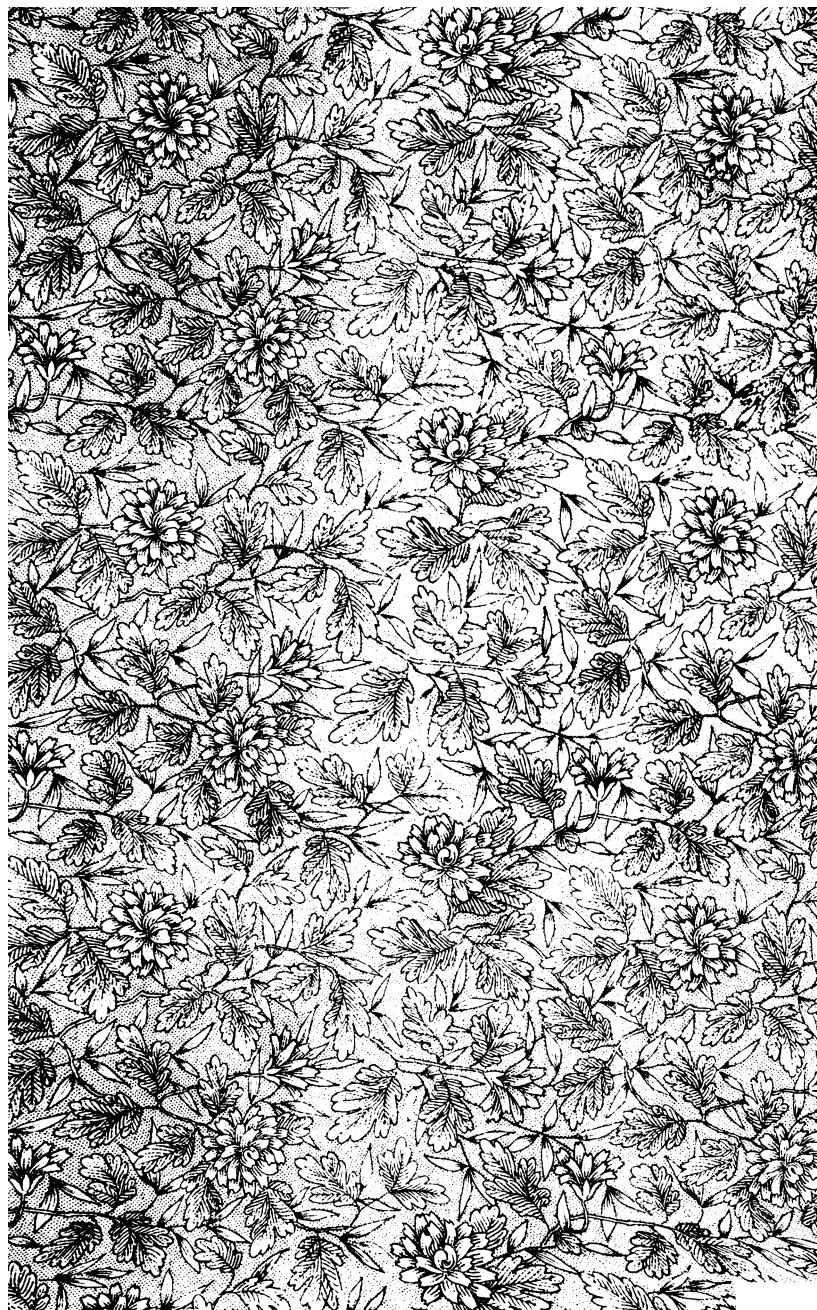
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AN OPEN FOE

AN OPEN FOE

A Romance

BY

ADELINE SERGEANT

AUTHOR OF 'BEYOND RECALL'

'Who with repentance is not satisfied,
Is not of heaven nor of earth.'



IN THREE VOLUMES

VOLUME II.

LONDON

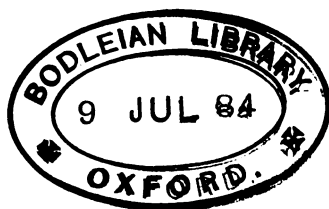
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AN OPEN FOE.

PART III. (Continued.)—MAURICE.

CHAPTER XVII.

SIR ADRIAN'S SON.

"Nor going to ride to-day, Frank?"

"Not to-day, General. Going to look in at my Club."

"Don't forget that you dine at home this evening, boy."

"All right, General. Eight sharp, I suppose?"

"Eight o'clock precisely," said the General, with a bend of his stately gray head. "Are you ready, Jessie? Come then, my dear."

General Sir Adrian Longmore and his daughter rode slowly away towards the Park, and his son stood on the door-step watching their departure, and lazily drawing on an immaculate pair of

gloves. The father was a tall spare man, rather bent, with a fine face, singularly mild thoughtful eyes, grizzled hair and moustache. The son was likewise tall and good-looking: he had closely-cropped black hair and moustache, straight features, and vivacious dark eyes. His attire was faultlessly correct: he had a flower in his button-hole, perfect boots, cane and gloves, and—crowning touch of all—an eye-glass, which was perpetually tumbling down and requiring lengthy and elaborate readjustment.

He buttoned his gloves, flicked an imaginary speck of dust off his patent-leather boots, shook himself a little, like a dog before he goes out walking, and then prepared to descend the steps. But before he had reached the pavement, a ragged boy with a letter in his hand ran up to him and demanded, with a pull of his forelock, whether Mr. Longmore did not live “somewhere abouts.”

“What do you want with him?” said Frank Longmore good-humouredly.

“I’ve a letter for ‘im, guv’nor.”

“Give it me: I’m Mr. Longmore.”

The boy assured himself by a rapid glance into the gentleman’s face that he was in earnest, then put the letter into his hand, and scudded away like a lapwing. Frank held the letter

delicately : it had not arrived by a very inviting messenger ; he made a slight grimace before he opened it. The man in livery standing at the door glanced at him, and was amazed by the sudden change in his young master's countenance. Frank turned violently red, then pale, then looked so undisguisedly amazed, pleased, and excited, that his usually impassive face was scarcely recognisable.

“ Call a hansom, Peters—quickly.”

The order was obeyed with some inward wondering, and the wonder was redoubled when Mr. Longmore turned to add,

“ If I am not back by eight o'clock, tell Lady Longmore that I have been summoned away on very important business.”

Then he stepped into the hansom, told the driver to set him down at the entrance of a street near Holborn, and drove away at a pace which caused Peters to ask himself whether or no Mr. Frank had suddenly gone out of his mind. It was not a customary thing to see him in such excitement.

Meanwhile Maurice Guyon was walking restlessly up and down the bare attic-room in which Davy's last days had been spent. His face was pale, his brow knitted : occasionally he drew a

deep breath as if some heavy load of care oppressed him. "Will he come?" he said to himself over and over again. "Will he come, or have they all abandoned me—as Ilma did?"

A footstep on the stairs, a hasty knock at the door, seemed to reassure him. He drew himself up, smiled a little to himself, and said, "Come in." But there was still a look of nervous tension about the muscles of his face which was singularly unlike the serenity that usually distinguished it.

The visitor entered and closed the door behind him. Maurice stood still. But he could not long maintain his impassive attitude, for Frank Longmore seized him by the shoulders, and almost hugged him in his delight. Maurice's reserve did not last a moment: his face melted into a responsive smile; his hand sought his friend's hand warmly, and the water stood in his eyes, when at last he found voice to speak.

"I have come back, you see, after all."

Frank wrung his hand again, looked into his face, and burst into a somewhat unsteady laugh.

"Why, Maurice," he said, "Maurice, old fellow! don't you know that we thought you dead?"

He put both his hands upon Maurice's

shoulders, and looked as if he would gladly have given him a second embrace.

Maurice lifted his own hand and gave his friend's a mighty grasp. His cheek was flushed now and his eyes smiling.

"Then you did not give me up altogether?"

"Give you up? Why should I give you up? It is you that have given us up apparently! Where do you come from, old boy? and what are you doing in this hole of a place? Why did you not come to my governor's?"

"I have plenty to tell you, I see," said Maurice.

"I should think you have! Come home with me now: everybody will be delighted." Frank walked round and round his friend with the air of a mastiff that has found a long-lost master, and does not know how to express his joy. "The General will be in to dinner at eight: there are some people coming—my mother will be charmed."

Maurice laughed. "I'm an escaped prisoner, Frank, fresh from the wilds of Siberia."

"So much the better. Why, you'll be a perfect boon to all of us. What a subject for conversation! Count Zaranoff—just arrived from Tomsk—all the women will make a hero of you——"

"You don't realise the situation at all," said Maurice rather impatiently. "And no wonder. But I wish you would not be so dense."

Frank stopped in his peregrinations and stared at him with a sudden consciousness that all was not so well as it had seemed to him at first. "Why, what's the matter?" he said, stumbling a little over the words, and putting up his eye-glass once more—an eye-glass which had the property of considerably detracting from the intelligence of his expression. "Anything wrong?"

"Would you walk up Pall Mall with me at the present moment?"

"Of course I would. Why not? Oh, your coat! As if that mattered to me!" said Frank superbly. "You are rather seedy, aren't you, old man? But an escaped exile and patriot and all that sort of thing can wear what he likes, you know. Why were you not an Englishman, Maurice?"

"I ought to have been, ought I not? Come, Frank, I must explain things a little. Would you mind listening to me? Can you spare me half an hour?"

"An hour—two hours—as long as you like. What is the meaning of this sudden air of

mystery and conspiracy?" said Frank with levity. "And what did you mean by saying at the end of your letter that I was to inquire here for Mr. Maurice Guyon? Am I not to call you by your own name?"

"Maurice Guyon; nothing more nor less. They are two of my Christian names, you know."

"Just so; but why?"

"Because if I were known by my own name our paternal government might demand my extradition. You used not to be so obtuse, Frank," said Maurice tranquilly.

Frank Longmore's face fell. He dropped his eye-glass, put his hands in his pocket, and looked down. "I am sorry for this," he remarked presently, with a gravity of which he had scarcely seemed capable. Maurice shrugged his shoulders slightly and did not answer.

"Then you are in hiding?"

"I play the violin in the orchestra at the Parthenon Theatre," said Maurice lightly. "I could find nothing else to do. It's not a bad life if you give yourself to it."

"That's absurd, you know," said Frank slowly.

"Absurd? oh no. Evidently the only thing for which I am fit."

"When you were with the Embassy in Vienna——"

"May I ask you not to refer to that time?" said Maurice with the careless grace of manner that was natural to him. "It is all over for me now, and really the mention of it seems incongruous." He glanced down at his shabby boots and smiled.

"By Jove!" said Frank, giving to his voice an indescribable intonation of disbelief in his own senses; "it's impossible! To think what you were then! We thought you would have the Embassy yourself sooner or later! Do you remember that torchlight boar-hunt with the Emperor? And that fascinating little Countess Ilma? She had hardly made up her mind whether to prefer you or Prince Worlaski, had she? She——"

"Frank," said Maurice gently, "no doubt these reminiscences are brilliant ones, but you must yourself conceive that there are circumstances in which they may be disagreeable."

Frank looked at him with a start and saw that his face had turned a little pale. "Why," he said bluntly enough, "you know that you could have it all over again if you chose."

"Impossible."

"Then I have been misinformed."

"What have you heard?"

"Oh, that His Majesty was willing enough to pardon you on one condition—that you should simply acknowledge the truth of the accusations, ask pardon, and give your word of honour to mix yourself up no more in socialist conspiracies."

"Pardon—I was never a conspirator."

"Exactly, that is what I was told you said——"

"And you doubted my word?"—Maurice's eyes flashed fire.

Longmore hesitated, with a puzzled look. Maurice turned away.

"I regret that I troubled you," he said in an unmoved voice.

"Don't be in such a hurry, old man," returned Frank. "You see you never gave me your word about the matter. I never heard what you had to say about it." He added, with perfect composure, "I never doubted *you*."

Maurice turned round and smiled with an apologetic look. "I beg your pardon, Frank. I'm afraid I am growing touchy."

"Not you," said Frank quickly. "You were never touchy, and you never will be. Why did you not write to me?"

"I wish I had written. But after that miserable affair I did not know whether you were not of Countess Ilma's opinion—that I had disgraced you all, and you would rather see no more of me."

"Did she say that?"

"Yes."

"But my father never said it, Maurice."

"Did he not? Well, I misunderstood her."

Frank made a gesture of impatience. "Don't you know the General better than that? Don't you know that he makes himself miserable for a whole evening if he thinks that he has hurt the feelings of some poor beggar in the course of afternoon?"

"I know that," said Maurice; "that was why such a message from him cut me to the heart."

He turned his back upon his friend and looked out of the window. Frank exhibited every sign of repressed vexation and impatience. He drummed with his foot upon the fender, whistled softly, frowned, and looked at the ceiling. Then he came to Maurice's side, thrust his arm into his, and spoke in a tone of inconsequent cheerfulness.

"I'll cut that dinner at home," he said. "You shall come and dine with me somewhere. At the

Club. No? Well, then, at a French restaurant that I can show you: I'll make you open your eyes at the cooking, I can tell you. I stick to English cookery. But you—I know you of old!"

Maurice laughed aloud. "My tastes are changed, Frank. I'm not a Secretary of Legation any longer. I dine on a mutton-chop and a glass of ale—when I can get it."

"So did Louis Napoleon when he was in exile," said Frank easily. "Come along, old man; and when we have dined, we can talk."

Maurice yielded to his friend's solicitation, and was borne away to a foreign-looking little eating-house, which speedily justified its claim to Longmore's commendation. The two men dined and enjoyed their dinner, giving themselves airs of connoisseurship over their French *plats* and excellent wine; and then they lighted their cigars and, with elbows on the table and heads rather close together, abandoned themselves to the pleasure of the first confidential talk which they had had since the days of Maurice Zaranoff's prosperity in Vienna and St. Petersburg.

Meanwhile, the Longmore's dinner-party passed off successfully in spite of the mysterious absence of the son of the house. When the visitors had gone, the General said good-night to his wife and

daughters, and retired to his favourite room, the library. Here he lighted his lamp, and, seating himself at the desk, opened a manuscript volume of notes, spread out some maps and drawings before him, and plunged into military history. He had set his heart upon writing an account of a great Eastern campaign in which he had been engaged, and the work was very dear to him.

He was too deeply absorbed to notice the opening of the door and the entrance of his son. Frank stood on the hearthrug for a few minutes watching the stately gray head bent over the desk, the intellectual, kindly features, over which the green-shaded lamp cast a mellow gleam of light, the deeply-veined hand that moved steadily across the paper, pausing now and then when the General cast his eye upon his notes, or traced some line of march upon his map with one considerate finger. Frank came close to him at last and seated himself on the arm of his father's chair, laying one hand on the General's shoulder and causing him to look up with a sudden start and friendly smile.

"Eh?" he said. "You there, Frank? You gave us the slip to-night." And he went on writing.

"How's the book getting on, sir?" said Frank

lazily. "Don't you want me to copy that map for you? I'm a dab hand at maps."

The General smiled. "The book is progressing," he said. "When we leave town it will progress faster."

Frank leaned forward and pretended to examine the map. His father suspended his work, quill in hand, and looked into his son's face, now very near his own, with kindly keenness. When Frank drew it away expressing a vague dislike for the colours used and a suggestion that his father was developing pre-Raphaelite tastes, the General mildly shook his head and laid his hand on his son's arm.

"Never mind the map," he said. "There is something wrong with *you*. What is it?"

"With me?" said Frank, as if he were considering the subject. "Nothing wrong but that peacock-blue, General. I always knew that you would be demoralised when you took to visiting the Grosvenor. Stick to the Academy and you'll be safe."

"Now, is it money this time, or is it disappointed love?" said Sir Adrian, quaintly soliloquising. "You are not haggard enough to have been gambling. I should say that it was horse-flesh. Anything wrong with Brown Molly's

fetlock? Or have you lost what the young fellows call 'a pot of money' on the Derby?"

"Oh, hang it, governor," said Frank irreverently; "you are quite too 'cute for me. I never had a secret in my life but I was afraid to come into your presence lest you should read it off my face like a book. You take an unfair advantage, General."

"Oh, but you came to tell it to me," said the General in his quietest way. "Why else should you bother me at this time of night? You always make your confessions when I get to my book for half an hour's work, although you know how busy I am with it, you rascal."

"You're fonder of your book than your family, any day," said Frank. And then he dropped his eye-glass and did not pick it up again.

"What is it, my boy?"

Frank's face suddenly assumed a graver expression, but he maintained his position on the arm of the chair, while his hand lay affectionately on his father's shoulder.

"It isn't about myself at all this time, General," he began. "It's about Maurice Zaranoff."

"Maurice Zaranoff!" repeated Sir Adrian in a tone of extreme and rather cold surprise. "What about him? Is he dead?"

"Not at all. Escaped from Siberia : turned up in England : very much out at elbows, and rather down in the mouth."

"Is his escape known to the authorities? If they chose to demand his extradition——"

"Just so : he might be arrested. He doesn't think they will, however, if he keeps quiet. He has dropped his name, and nobody takes any notice of him."

"He is not safe. He should go to America."

"I don't think he will."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. He says that he should like to see Ilma again."

"What business has he with *her*?"

Frank shrugged his shoulders and made no reply. Sir Adrian waited for a little time, and then said anxiously :

"Well, Frank?"

"Well, General?"

"My dear boy, did Maurice Zaranoff attempt no explanation of his past conduct?"

"I don't know about explanation—because that involves proof, does it not?—he made assertions," said Frank carelessly. "He said that the whole story against him had been a lie, that he was no more a Nihilist than you

were—wouldn't blow up the Winter Palace or assassinate the Czar for worlds, you know—and that his share in the conspiracy for which he was condemned was limited to hiding two or three of the conspirators and their belongings in his own house because they had been his intimate friends, and he couldn't go back on them, don't you see."

"That is a most extraordinary story, Frank," said Sir Adrian, who had given his son's burlesque of an explanation his most serious hearing, varied occasionally by a doubtful glance into that young man's impervious countenance.

"Well now, General," said Frank cheerfully, "to say the truth, it struck me as odd too. But Maurice Zaranoff always could twist me round his little finger when he chose."

"Then do you not believe him?"

"Oh, *I* believe him. But then"—with a sudden twinkle in his eye—"I'm a fool."

"Only when you choose to make yourself one," said his father significantly. He sank into a deep reverie, while Frank whistled a tune, screwed his eye-glass first into one eye and then into the other, and beat a tattoo upon the table.

The General interrupted these proceedings by saying :

"Will you kindly give me your serious attention, Frank? Did Maurice deny all complicity in that Nihilist plot for which he was arrested?"

"Every bit."

"His only concern with it lay in sheltering and befriending the fugitives?"

"Exactly so, General."

"That, in the eyes of the law, is a crime," said Sir Adrian judicially. "And what about Anna Strolenski?"

His son looked blank. "Eh?" he said.

"Anna Strolenski. The sister of Casimir Strolenski, who was secreted in his house. Do you not know that story?"

"No."

"You *must* have heard something of it," said Sir Adrian, his brow growing dark as he spoke. "Do you not know the real reason why Ilma's engagement to him was broken off?"

"I thought that it was because of his exile."

"Not at all. In that case Ilma's conduct would not have gained my approval. It would have shown a cold-hearted, faithless nature, such as one abhors in man or woman. I should not have been so ready to invite her here if she had abandoned Maurice Zaranoff merely on account of his changed circumstances."

"Well?" said Frank in an interested tone. "What was the reason, then, sir? I know that there was a great deal which I did not hear. I was in America at the time, and the trial was very quickly despatched. What was it?"

"Simply this," said Sir Adrian gravely, "that Anna Strolenski was Maurice Zaranoff's mistress."

"Oh, I see." Frank was silent for a moment, then asked if this fact had transpired at the trial.

"I think so, but the proceedings were secret. Ilma's indignation led her to dissolve the engagement."

"Maurice mentioned the Strolenskis," said Frank thoughtfully, "but he said nothing especial about Anna Strolenski. Do you know, General, I shouldn't wonder if there was some misunderstanding about that story? It doesn't seem to me that Maurice was ever that sort of fellow. Why, he was mad about Ilma before he was twenty, and would not believe that any other woman was worth looking at! Did he ever acknowledge the truth of this little report? I can well imagine Countess Ilma going wild with jealousy if he glanced in another direction!"

"I do not know whether he acknowledged it or not," said the General stiffly. "All I can say

is that he never contradicted it, either to Ilma or to myself—his guardian and his father's oldest friend."

Frank shrugged his shoulders.

"You used to tell me to give a fellow the benefit of the doubt, sir," he said. "You were not always so suspicious."

The General started. "I am not suspicious, I hope; am I, my boy?" he said anxiously. "I only wish the matter could be cleared up. It strikes me that Ilma was once very fond of him, and that if she saw matters in the right light—and he were free from blame—eh, what do you think?—" Sir Adrian broke off, and regarded his son with a speculative look.

Frank's laughter was uncontrollable. "Match-making, General! It won't do: Maurice will never forgive her for marrying Nicholas Zaranoff. I fancy that we had better not interfere. By the by, he wants some money."

"Of course, there need be no difficulty about that. How much?" and Sir Adrian drew his cheque-book towards him.

"He will only take a loan. But he thinks that he might without difficulty obtain the rents of his mother's property on the Prussian side of the frontier, if you would quietly make the arrange-

ments for him. That estate was not confiscated, and belongs to him properly enough; but his steward passed into Ilma's service, and is probably receiving and appropriating the rents. He thinks that something might be done."

"Certainly. I will manage the matter if possible. He can always come to us for ready money. And, don't you think, Frank, that he could be persuaded to go to America? He might find some opening for his talents there."

"Poor old fellow! yes."

The General sighed. "Ah, poor fellow!" he repeated. "Yes. No man ever began life under fairer auspices than Maurice Zaranoff. He is not yet six-and-twenty, and he is exiled, ruined, disgraced! Possibly through no fault but a too ardent sympathy with the men who desired freedom for their own country and their own souls! How long has Maurice been in England?"

"About eight months."

"What has he been doing?"

Frank hesitated a little. "He has been playing the violin at a theatre for the last few weeks. Before that, I fancy that he was—hard up."

"Why did the poor lad not come to me?"

"Why, you see, General," said Frank diplomatically, "he thought—curiously enough—that

you had given him up and would not believe a word he said ; and he was too proud to force himself upon you. He won't eat humble-pie, let me tell you ; he says he did nothing but what was right, and plumes himself upon it. An 'twere to do again, you would find him in the ranks of the red-hot Republicans, I fancy."

"What has made him come to me now then ?"

"Not his own necessities. He wants to do somebody else a service. Now, isn't that just what you would have expected from him ? Can you look me in the face, General, and say that you don't think Maurice Zaranoff the soul of honour ?"

Frank laughed as he made this challenge, and Sir Adrian smiled in reply, but shook his head.

"I should like to know the whole story, Frank."

"You don't deserve to have a Damon for your son if you repudiate Pythias in that flinty-hearted manner," said Frank quaintly. "I can't stand seeing you try to prove yourself the heavy father of antiquated comedy. Come, General, say that you believe him out and out, or, on my life, I don't believe he'll take the money. I gave my word for your faith in him."

The General was silent for a moment. "Honestly, Frank, do *you* trust him?"

"Of course I do."

"Well, I accept your judgment—and his word. As regards Anna Strolenski, there is nothing proven. It is his word against Ilma's apparently—if he denies the story of his *liaison* with her."

"Ilma is a charming person, but not distinguished for candour," said Frank, rising. Then he fixed his eye-glass in his eye and gave his father a sort of glare of satisfaction. "I must say, General, that you are a trump and no mistake," he remarked. "Good-night. I'll see Maurice to-morrow."

And he made his way out of the room just as the clock struck one.

The General looked after him with an odd smile, in which there was both tenderness and humour, reflected a little, then shook his head and murmured a few words to himself. "The rogue has cheated me out of a good hour's writing as well as of some misplaced sympathy," he said, looking at the manuscripts strewn upon his desk. "I wonder whether I am getting into my dotage that I can be so easily wheedled into an opinion by that scapegrace of a boy—with his eye-glass! But I think he is right about poor Zaranoff; I do

indeed. Maurice was a noble-hearted lad. I thank God that I am an Englishman!" said the General in his devout and simple way; and then he replaced his papers in his desk, turned out the lamp very carefully, and made his way in the dark upstairs to bed.





CHAPTER XVIII.

FRIENDS AND FOES.

ONE of Frank's first questions to his friend next morning, uttered in his lightest and easiest style, ran thus—

“I say, Maurice, who was Anna Strolenski?”

Maurice looked up from a portmanteau which he was packing with his very scanty possessions, and changed colour.

“Don't you know?” he said.

“No.”

“She was the daughter of a Polish patriot. She went to St. Petersburg to study for the medical profession,”—Frank raised his eyebrows, “and there she and her brother embraced Revolutionary views and occupied prominent places in the movement. Her brother was a student when I knew him first: through him I became acquainted with the sister.”

This explanation was given very dryly, as if Maurice did not wish to enter further upon the subject. But Frank pursued his inquiries.

"What should a woman have to do with a Revolutionary movement?" he said.

Maurice laughed and spoke more freely. "My good friend, women have been the life and soul of the movement," he said. "Do you know nothing of the Korniloff sisters, of Sophia Perovskaia, of Vera Sassulitch, and Jessy Helfman! Without women our secret press would never have existed, as it has done in the very face of the police! Half the prohibited books and papers passed the frontier by the hands of women."

"Why do you not keep those matters in the hands of men?"

"Are women not human like ourselves then? Can you expect them to do nothing when their brothers, lovers, and husbands, are arrested and sentenced to ten or fifteen years of hard labour for making speeches or lending books? Would your own mother and sisters do nothing if you were imprisoned in that vile place Karkoff?"

"And Anna Strolenski—she——"

"She did what other women of her age and class have done. She worked in a factory for fifteen hours a day at one time, in order that

she might do the work of a propagandist of her faith. Then she became compromised with the Government, and joined in the attempt to blow up the Imperial train at Moscow. She was not actively concerned in it, but, by Russian law, a person who knows even of an attempt upon the Emperor's life and does not discover it to the authorities, incurs the penalty of death."

"You knew her well?"

"Very well. My dear Frank," said Maurice, rather hastily, "if you have a good reason for speaking to me about her and about those times, do so; but if you are asking questions merely out of curiosity, pardon me for reminding you that the subject is an intensely painful one to me."

"I know it is. But I have a reason. Would you sooner talk of it with my father or with me? because my father wants to ask you one or two questions——"

Frank paused in some embarrassment. Maurice folded his arms and looked at him.

"You told me just now that the General did not doubt my word," he said. "Why should he wish to question me?"

"Well, he was your guardian, and he wants to see through things clearly, you know. I told

him that I thought you would be quite prepared to answer anything he liked to ask."

"Certainly. I should like to have a conversation with him very much."

"May he come here and see you?" said Frank eagerly.

"I should not like to trouble him. Let me go to him. I would rather see him at the Club or elsewhere, but I do not mind."

"I'll go and arrange it with him this minute. Stay here till I come back, will you? He's awfully anxious to see you, Maurice. I won't be long."

And before Maurice could answer, Frank was gone.

He had no difficulty in persuading Sir Adrian to return with him at once. The old General's heart was yearning over Maurice Zaranoff, who had been to him almost as a son, and who seemed to have suffered cruel injustice in his fatherland. He came, therefore, very gladly. As Frank Longmore guided his father through the dreary poverty-stricken streets, and up the narrow stair to the landing at the top of the house, where the afternoon sunshine fell in patches upon yellow squalid walls and stained ill-fitting doors, he was not devoid of a hope that these surroundings would

impress Sir Adrian with a deep sense of Maurice's present state of poverty. He produced an impression, but not the one that he had intended to produce. At the head of the stairs Sir Adrian turned round, his soldierly figure drawn up into military stiffness, his eyes sparkling with unwonted emotion, and confronted Master Frank severely.

"Why did you bring me here?" he said. "I had no notion that things were as bad as this. Maurice might have seen me at a public place or in my own house."

"Why, governor," said Frank craftily, "I did not think that you would object to the poor old fellow's poverty?"

"Object!" said the General in suppressed tones. "Have you no delicacy of feeling, sir? It is an unwarrantable impertinence to penetrate where a man has not invited me. I feel myself an insolent intruder: that is all. If it were possible, I would relinquish the visit at this moment and go straight home again."

Frank did not feel himself equal to the occasion, and whilst he hesitated Maurice himself came to the door of his room. The General's wrinkled cheek reddened when he saw him, but he paused no longer. He stepped forward, greeted the young man very warmly, and

entered the room with a sort of hurry and bashfulness of manner, as if he were not at all assured of his right to be there.

“It was like the meeting of two sovereign princes,” Frank said once, long afterwards, when he had occasion to describe the interview to Mrs. Ravenscroft. “Each of them put on his grandest manners for the occasion, and that is saying a great deal ; for neither the General nor Maurice ever suffered from a deficiency in that respect. My father would not sit down until Maurice seated himself also. Maurice expressed himself honoured by the visit. The General was secretly shocked at the bareness of the place ; but looked utterly unconscious of his surroundings, and asked a few harmless questions about Maurice’s escape and the details of his imprisonment. When Maurice wanted him to look at a little map to show the route by which he had eluded the Russian guards, my father strained his dear short-sighted eyes over it and could not see it at the end, all because he would not put on a pair of spectacles that he generally carries with him and uses for small print. When I afterwards asked him why : ‘My dear fellow,’ he said very seriously, ‘I refrained from using my glasses because I felt

that they would make me appear more prying and inquisitive than I really was!' And there they sat, exchanging civilities, each of them wanting to attack the real question in hand, and neither of them liking to begin it, until I longed to punch both their dear old heads."

"What were *you* doing?" Frank's interlocutor demanded.

"I? Oh, I was sitting on a deal table, kicking my heels."

"And who began the conversation?"

"Maurice. He looked at me once or twice: then got up and said very quietly, 'I think you have some questions to ask me, Sir Adrian.' So my father rose too. Wouldn't sit when Maurice was standing, you know."

"And yet he did not entirely believe in Maurice Zaranoff's innocence?"

"No. But the General is always nervously anxious not to kick the man that is down," said Frank. "Maurice had been so excessively unfortunate that my father felt it his duty to be preposterously polite. I have seen him behave in the same way to a criminal condemned to the galleys."

"Your father is a man of exceptionally fine manners," said Felicia.

"Yes," returned Frank placidly; "I don't know which are the finer: his manners or his feelings. What makes it more touching is that I have inherited both."

"As is proved by the way in which you sat on a table and kicked your—your feet——"

"My heels!" interpolated Longmore decidedly.

"Well—your heels, in the midst of a painful and exciting interview, instead of trying to help either Maurice or Sir Adrian."

"How do you know that I did not try to help them? You have not heard the end of my story. Maurice had taken the bit between his teeth, and would not have allowed any hand like mine to hold him in. To begin with, that question cost him an effort: he turned quite white when he had asked it. The General answered with some humming and hawing that there were certain points upon which he should like to be reassured; and Zaranoff replied that he would do his best to answer all his questions, but was a little afraid that it would not be in his power to do so.

"The General looked queer at this, but he recollected himself (and his *rôle*) and rejoined politely that he was sure at any rate that

Maurice Zaranoff would never say one word to him which was untrue. And then he looked Maurice in the face with an eye like a hawk's, and Maurice looked him back again, and said, 'You are right, sir,'—and do you know, I think Maurice had the best of it."

"No doubt; but go on."

"Oh well, that was tantamount to a declaration of war. They went at it then, tooth and nail. It seemed to me that Maurice was not quite sure of his ground, and did not know how much to say without implicating other people; and that the General knew enough to enable him to ask very ugly questions. For instance: 'How far were you aware of Strolenski's plot?' and 'Had you any reason to suppose that Anna Strolenski regarded you as more than a friend?' were very difficult things to answer. I saw Maurice wince at them."

"Then your father was not quite so kind to him as at the beginning of the interview?"

"Kind? Isn't that just like a woman! Excuse me for saying so. He was terribly polite, I tell you, and sometimes rather overcome by his emotions and all that sort of thing. But I can tell you exactly how Maurice regarded the interview. My father took a chair,—it tires

him to stand long,—and begged Maurice to do the same. Maurice refused. ‘No,’ he said, in an odd low voice, ‘I am before a judge : prisoners do not sit in their judge’s presence.’ The General was a little hard upon him just then. He looked at him and said nothing—simply waited a while and went on to his next question. But I never saw Maurice nearer losing his self-command. It struck me at the time that he was thinking of the old days when the General had been more of a father to him than a judge.

“My father confined himself to political matters at first ; and here Maurice cleared himself in his eyes completely. He did not deny that his sympathies were with the Liberals ; but he had never gone the length of the Nihilists, and he repudiated all connection with ‘the Terror.’ He was so earnest and so conclusive on this point, that the General was quite satisfied. And then came the subject about which I knew that my father felt very strongly.

“‘Excuse me if I question you on a merely personal matter,’ he said. ‘Will you tell me now—as a friend—what was the real reason of the Countess Ilma’s rupture of her engagement to marry you?’

“‘I don’t think she cared about going to Siberia,’ said Maurice coolly.

“The General did not like that answer. He thought it evasive. You know his way of quietly and simply throwing a bombshell into a household of peaceful folk, without the slightest notion of the mischief it may do——”

“No,” said Mrs. Ravenscroft, smiling, “I don’t. I should think it the most uncharacteristic proceeding of Sir Adrian’s of which you have told me yet.”

“Possibly, but people don’t always act up to their characters, you know. He said suddenly and in his gravest, most ordinary tones, ‘Is it not true that the Countess Ilma refused to continue her engagement on account of her well-founded jealousy of Anna Strolenski?’ He might as well have thrown a lighted match into a gun-powder magazine or anything of that sort.”

“Never mind comparisons. What did Count Zaranoff do?”

“Do? He did nothing. Stood like a statue; but his face turned scarlet. To tell the honest truth, he looked horribly guilty. My father gazed at him—unmercifully—there’s no other word for it. I expected him every minute to produce his spectacles and put a climax to

Maurice's confusion by regarding him through them with that air of mingled severity and sorrow which always used to bring me to my knees before him, metaphorically speaking, when I had committed a misdemeanour in my youth.

"Well, for almost the first time Maurice fenced. He had answered every other question with perfect frankness; but one could see that this one was a facer. He said, 'Do you not think that that matter had better be left in abeyance, General?' He did not say it offensively of course, but it was just the sort of thing to put the General's back up. I rather expected to see my father rise and bow himself out of the room. But you can't always prognosticate what the General will do——"

"Except that it is sure to be the kindest and most thoughtful action that can be devised under the circumstances," said Felicia warmly.

"Exactly," responded Frank as complacently as if she had addressed a compliment to himself.

"That was what happened of course. He was not at all put out. He said almost affectionately, 'I know—and I regret—that I must seem intrusive. But remember, my dear Maurice, that your father left you in my guardianship, and

that I have a very great and tender interest in you. Moreover, the Countess' story threw considerable blame on you. Otherwise I should have said that she had acted wrongly in refusing to fulfil her engagement, even under the very trying circumstances in which she was placed. Whereupon Maurice answered: 'I beg your pardon for my hesitation, Sir Adrian. I do not quite understand you. May I ask you to explain?'

"'Explain!' said my father. 'I have nothing to explain. I simply wish to know who was in fault—Ilma or you. In a matter where so much is at stake it is very important that your character should be free from every shadow of blame.'

"'Who was in fault?' said Maurice in rather a wondering tone. Then he hesitated: 'She gave no reason for abandoning me,' he said. 'I suppose that in her eyes *I* was to blame.'

"He had turned pale, and bit his lip savagely when he had done speaking. The General got up. 'I am sorry for it,' he said. 'You have exonerated yourself from any share in the conspiracy; but you certainly do not seem able to assure me that you acted as a gentleman should have acted towards your promised wife—'

I am sorry for it, for I thought better of you, Maurice.'

"Zaranoff made no answer. My father was turning towards the door when I, who did not like to see them separate in this manner, got down from the table and put my hand on the General's shoulder. 'Stop a minute,' I said; 'you have given Maurice no chance of answering you, for you have accused him of nothing yet. Let him speak for himself.'

"The General stopped short. Maurice looked up with a defiant sort of smile. 'I have nothing to say,' he replied. 'What should I say?'

"I stared at him in astonishment. I knew that Maurice was of a peculiarly sensitive temperament; a sharp word from my father in old days would have half-broken his heart. And the General had been rather hard on him; his kind old face was so grieved and his voice had such a disappointed ring that I wondered to myself how Maurice could stand it; and there he was smiling and declaring that he had nothing at all to say. It looked a trifle shameless, did it not?"

"I think you and your father were very blind," said the lady. "If I had been there——"

"If you had been there, madam, you would

have seen no more than I did. I was deceived for the space of one minute only. I stared at Maurice, and it crossed my mind that those smiling lips of his were just as white as death. He had the look that I once saw in the eyes of an animal which was being vivisected at a hospital in Paris, and couldn't cry out——”

“Don't go on, please, Frank. What were *you* doing there? It makes one feel quite sick!”

“It made me sick too. I went with a friend—a medical student—not knowing what I was going to see. I don't deny that I had to come out of the building in a very queer state. However, the remembrance of that day saved my opinion of Maurice Zaranoff—for the time being.”

“What did you do?”

“I put up my eye-glass and said: ‘As you please. It's no odds to me one way or another; but you might oblige my father’——”

“Frank, you didn't say that?”

“I did. And my father told me not to play the fool, but to come away with him. He had opened the door already. Maurice came forward, held it for him, and bowed him out. For once in a way the General was uncivil. His

finest feelings, you see, had received a shock, and he couldn't get over it in a moment. He walked past as if he had not seen Maurice. Filial piety obliged me to follow, for the staircase was dark, and the streets in that neighbourhood narrow; and although my father is very good at remembering the course of a river in the Deccan or the direction of a mountain-track in the Himalayas, he invariably loses himself in the streets of London."

"So you went away?"

"I did, but I said to Maurice, 'Bye-bye, old man, I'll be back in ten minutes.' I went down with the General, piloted him into a main thoroughfare, put him into a cab, and gave the driver the address. 'What are you going to do?' said my father, suddenly waking up to the situation. 'Going back to Maurice,' I said. 'No, no,' my father said, 'no, Frank; come back with me. I want you.' 'Thank you, General,' I said; 'but under the circumstances I think Maurice wants me more.' So I shut him into the cab and departed."

"And when you got back——" said Mrs. Ravenscroft eagerly.

"When I got back," said Frank, "I felt like Mother Hubbard——"

“ ‘She went to the joiner’s
To buy him a coffin,
But when she came back
The dog was a-laughin’.”

“When I came back, my dog was smoking a cigar.”

“I don’t believe it!” exclaimed Mrs. Ravenscroft.

“True, nevertheless. And then he said: ‘Well Frank, there is *one* point, at least, upon which I don’t seem able to satisfy the General. I can’t do anything more. I will see Ilma as soon as possible. In the meantime, don’t ask me to discuss the matter. Shall we go and dine somewhere, and then look in at a theatre?’ And I agreed.”

“Where did you go?”

“We dined at an Italian restaurant near Leicester Square; and we had an exceedingly good dinner. And then we went to hear Vera de Lusignan sing.”

“What I do not understand,” said Mrs. Ravenscroft thoughtfully, “is Count Zaranoff’s embarrassment when he was questioned about this poor Anna Strolenski. Why did he evade the subject and seem confused?”

“Why?” said Frank with a little laugh.

“ Have you not guessed the reason? *He* never told me you may be sure; but a compatriot of his own afterwards let me into the secret. All the world of St. Petersburg knew that Anna Strolenski was madly in love with Maurice Zaranoff. And I suppose that he knew it too.”





CHAPTER XIX.

THE COTTAGE BY THE CHURCHYARD.

MAURICE had taken care to ask his friend where the Countess Zaranoff could be found. He was surprised at Frank's reply.

"She is staying with some people in Lincolnshire—the Ravenscrofts of Netherby. What, do you know them?"

"I have heard of them. Yes, I used to know Baroness Waldstein in Vienna."

"There's a very pretty girl in the family," said Frank carelessly. "I've seen her photograph. My mother knows them. Her name's Olivia."

"The Baroness must be old now."

"Old and lame, but as remarkable as ever, I am told. She was a beauty and a wit, my father says in his old-fashioned way. Not much beauty left now, but plenty of wit."

"Do you know the son, Gaston Ravenscroft ?
What sort of a man is he ?"

"Know nothing about him except that he is a great Oriental traveller, and at present a sort of lion. The curious thing is that he hates to talk about his travels. My father is wild to get hold of him." And then the conversation dropped. Maurice was about to give up the rooms which he had occupied for so many months: he did not know for how long a time he should be absent from town, and he could not afford to pay rent for them in his absence. He was sorry to give them up. The room that he usually occupied was the one in which Davy had died, the one in which Vera de Lusignan had sung. He could close his eyes and recall the scene in its minutest details; the gaunt crippled figure of the fiddler, propped up by pillows, his dark eyes glowing beneath his shaggy brows; at his side the tall, slight girl, her fair head touched with gold by the afternoon sunshine, her slim white hands crossed over a plain black gown, a knot of violets at her breast—that night, when he reached home after listening to Vera's voice once more, he paused to think upon these things with a sort of regretful fondness which was hard to analyse. But

presently he roused himself, and went about his packing with a weary yet resolute look upon his face—the look of one who would fain put away such memories from him for ever.

On the following day he started for Lincolnshire. He had sent a note to Vera, informing her of his intended departure, and had received a line in return. “Pray let me know soon whether your journey succeeds or not. I shall be anxious for news.” Armed with this word of encouragement he set out, eager to accomplish the task upon which he had been sent.

He made the mistake, however, of taking a ticket for Mickleham instead of Netherby. He did not know that the village was two or three miles distant from the neighbouring town.

The railway-station stood outside the town of Mickleham, which was a quaint country place, containing about five thousand inhabitants. Maurice made some inquiries as to the distance of Netherby from the town, and decided that it was better to establish himself in Mickleham rather than to seek for lodgings in the village, where he would run the risk of encountering the Countess Zaranoff or Gaston Ravenscroft face to face. He therefore took a room in a quiet little inn, dined and slept there, and set

out next morning to pay his visit to Hester Rowe. He had already ascertained that she was living still in the cottage by Netherby churchyard.

It was not much after eight o'clock when he reached the village. He went down a shady lane—the lane in which Davy had found his long-lost love, and carried her home to die. What a difference between that stormy night, as Maurice pictured it to himself, with the wind rustling amongst the branches and the cold rain-drops beating in the traveller's face, and this soft summer morning, when the leaves of the trees were golden-green in the sunlight, and “melodious birds” filled the air with madrigals! There had been a little rain in the night, and there was a scent of reviving grass and sweet moist earth: the drops still sparkled here and there on the long blades of the tall flowering grasses and on the half-opened blossoms of the dog-roses. The hedges were festooned with honeysuckle and traveller's joy. This part of the country was sufficiently sheltered to assume a very different character from the waste strip of land by the seashore: it lay low, and the soil was very fertile. Damp indeed it might be, but the marsh over against which the village had once

stood had been drained, and left little but a memory behind.

At the end of the lane Maurice came upon a low thatched cottage. Exactly opposite to this cottage was a small gate which opened into the churchyard. The church stood on a little eminence, and the pathway between the graves wound gently upward and away, until it was terminated by the churchyard gate proper, leading into the highroad. This pathway was often taken by the villagers, and especially by those persons who wished to reach Madame Waldstein's house (the chimneys of which could be seen from the lane), as it cut off a corner and made the route to the next village and also to Netherby railway-station much less circuitous.

Maurice paused before the cottage door. The blue smoke curling from the chimney told him that its mistress was at home. He had thought it more likely that he should find her at this early hour than in the afternoon, for he knew from Davy of her wandering habits. Sometimes she worked in the fields; sometimes she disappeared from her home for days together. On this occasion, however, she was to be found in her own cottage, and while he waited she herself

came to the door and looked at him from head to foot.

Hester Rowe was certainly more than eighty years of age, but her form was very slightly bent and her eyes were bright and piercing. Her face, brown as a berry, was deeply wrinkled, and her features were strong and harsh. She had donned no mourning for her son, who had been dead but a few days as yet; and the tints of the tawny handkerchief twisted round her head by way of a cap and the skirt of dusky red were as picturesque as those worn by the gipsy race to which it was well known that she belonged. In Maurice's opinion, the darting glances of her wild black eyes would at once have intimated to him that she belonged to a Bohemian tribe.

She made no curtsey or other sign of greeting when Maurice approached her. She stood on the threshold of the door with her arms akimbo, and surveyed him distrustfully as he spoke.

"You are Mrs. Rowe," said Maurice, raising his hat as it was his custom to do in accosting any woman. But the little act of courtesy was evidently regarded by her with suspicion.

"What do you want with me?" she asked in no friendly tone.

"I was your son's friend, and I want to tell you about something that he wished me to do."

"My son's friend?" she repeated. Then she looked him well over again, from head to foot. "How came Davy to have such a friend as you?"

"We helped each other. We lived a good deal together during the last few months of his life."

"You are a gentleman born," she said slowly and with a distrustful air.

"Does that make me the less fit to have been Davy's friend?" Maurice could not forbear to ask. Then, in a graver tone, "David Rowe was a good, true man. There are not many like him, and I am proud to have been his friend."

The old woman's face perceptibly softened. She took her left hand from her side and gave it a wide backward sweep to the dark interior of her house.

"If you were my son's friend," she said, "you may come in. It's not often a gentleman wants to make friends with the like of us. And when he does, harm generally comes of it. But you may tell me what you want."

She led the way into the cottage and pointed to a wooden arm-chair by the window. Maurice

gazed curiously around him. He had often pictured to himself in fancy the home in which Davy and Lucy had spent so many years—the house to which Lucy had been brought back to die. Now he stood within it and found it very unlike the place which he had imagined to himself. He saw the ordinary front room of an ordinary English cottage: the floor was paved with red brick, the walls were yellow-washed, the furniture was of deal, and, like the ceiling, had grown brown with age and smoke. Very little light came in through the diamond-paned window, for an immense bush of clematis had grown half across it and served as a sort of screen.

Mrs. Rowe did not seem prepared to listen to what her visitor had to say until she had finished the preparations that she was making for her morning's meal. Before long she placed a brown teapot and a loaf of bread upon the table, and offered Maurice a share of her breakfast.

Maurice accepted the cup of tea, recognising in the invitation a touch of likeness to Davy himself. How poor soever Davy might be, he never failed to be hospitable to his friends; he had always been ready to share his goods with another.

When the meal was over, the old woman seated herself upon a stool before the smouldering fire and leaned her elbows on her knees and her chin upon her hands. "Now," she said, "I am ready to hear what you have to say."

"Have you anything to ask me," said Maurice, "concerning your son David? I was with him when he died."

"No," she answered; "I have nothing to ask."

"You want to know nothing?"

"I want to know nothing," she repeated. And then, catching sight perhaps of some look of surprise or disapproval upon Maurice's face, she broke forth in a tone indicative of resentment. "Why should I want to know anything? He is dead and that is enough for me: I am left alone and desolate in my old age and he will never come back. Why should I want to hear what he said or how he looked? Such things are only comforting to those whose sorrow is less than mine."

She relapsed into silence when she had said these words, and looked stonily into the fire. Maurice changed his tone.

"You had a letter, I think, from the young lady who was so kind to him in his illness—Miss Marlitt—had you not?"

"Yes, I had. I couldn't read it myself; I can't well read writing, but them as can, read it out to me."

"Did she tell you anything of Davy's money matters?"

"Nothing."

"He had saved money," said Maurice; "not, perhaps, a great deal in some people's eyes, but a good deal for a poor man. He had about three hundred pounds laid by. Before he died he made a will leaving his money—not to you, for he said that you did not need it—but to a child who was once in this house, the child of Lucy Moore—the child whom you sent to the workhouse."

She dropped her hands and looked at him, with an angry light in her keen black eyes.

"So Davy told you that tale?" she said. "Ay, he was always weak, was Davy. He never knew how to stick to what he'd done and make the best of it. I've seen him sit and grizzle for an hour together when he came down here of late years to see me; all because of that child of Lucy Moore's, and because he didn't saddle himself with it instead of sending it to the place where it ought to be—the workhouse. I never had patience with Davy when he began to talk i' that way."

“He was certainly very sorry to think that [redacted] he had lost sight of the boy,” said Maurice gravely, “and he commissioned me and another friend of his to find out what had become of him. I have the money in trust for this boy—Bertram. Can you tell me anything about him?”

“No,” said Mrs. Rowe, relapsing into the apathy with which she had listened to his earlier questions. “Old Hervey took him away to the workhouse. That’s all I know.”

“You heard nothing of him afterwards?”

“No.”

“Then you cannot help me?” said Maurice, in a tone of disappointment.

She glanced at him and hesitated. “I can’t help you to find him,” she said dubiously, “but maybe I could tell you something about him—something as Davy didn’t know. Only—how am I to know that you are what you say you are? Perhaps you’re only a friend of Gaston Raveras-croft’s after all?”

“I am no friend of his,” said Maurice rather quickly.

“The better for you,” said Hester Rowve. “Well, you’ve got a face that one can trust as far as any face can be trusted, and a smooth tongue too; and if Davy left his money in your

charge for the boy, it's plain that *he* thought you might be trusted. I've something on my mind that I'm bound to tell to somebody before I die ; and as you are looking for that lad I may as well tell it to you."

Maurice was listening with deep attention. The old woman suddenly paused, rose and went into an inner room, whence she reappeared after a few moments' absence with a pocket-book in her hand. She seated herself again, and laid it before her on her lap.

"I won't make a long story about it," she said. "Davy went away from me on the evening of Lucy's funeral, and it wasn't long before Mr. Hervey called and took the child. After they were all gone I chanced to find this little case lying in the long grass outside the gate. I suppose that Lucy dropped it there before Davy found her and carried her in. I knew it was hers as soon as I opened it, because of this." As she spoke she opened the case and took from it a gold locket and chain, wrapped in a soft fine handkerchief. She opened the locket and showed Maurice that it contained two miniatures : one of a young girl, the other of Gaston Ravenscroft. It was Gaston's face at twenty-five ; the likeness was unmistakable. Then she took two or

three papers from the case, and held them in her hand while she spoke.

"I don't know for certain what is in these papers," she said, "because, as I told you, I can't read writing easy, nor print neither, for the matter of that. I've sometimes spelt over the print here, and it seems to me that these were Lucy's marriage-lines, or something of the kind, but I'm not sure."

"Could you not have asked somebody to help you?" said Maurice impulsively.

"I could trust nobody in Netherby," answered Mrs. Rowe. "I did not know what story that paper in the handwriting would have to tell; and though I have pondered over it a good bit, I don't rightly understand it now. It seems to say that she wasn't married, and that he had deserted her; but I'm not sure. And I didn't want the whole story talked over in the village by the folks that knew Lucy when she was a girl, and her father and mother before her, as would have been the case if I'd spoken to the parson or one of the gentry hereabouts."

"But you could have consulted Davy?"

The woman looked at him with a flash of her dark eyes. "Do you know why I couldn't show it to *him*?" she said, with a little contempt in

her voice and manner. "He was bitter enough against Ravenscroft as it was; but if I had told him half that I heard Lucy say, or maybe if I had shown him this paper, he would have killed Ravenscroft—ay, killed him and swung for it afterwards. I often wondered that he didn't. I should if I'd loved the girl as he did."

"You must be very thankful that he did not."

"No," she said. "I'd have liked him to punish Ravenscroft. Still, I had enough of a heart left me to be tender of my own child, and to keep from him what I feared would hurt him. I have hidden these papers ever since, meaning to give them back some day to Ravenscroft himself, or to the boy if ever I came across him; but I'm an old woman and I might die without doing it after all. Now that Davy's dead, it don't matter about keeping them a secret, and I should like to know for certain what they are. You may look at them."

Maurice took the papers eagerly from her hand. Little as was his acquaintance with the forms prescribed by English law, he knew that the first paper which met his eye was the marriage certificate of Lucy Moore with Gaston Ravenscroft, and that the second was a record of the birth and baptism of their son Bertram.

The third paper, which he read aloud for Mrs. Rowe's benefit, was the anonymous letter which Lucy had received on the day of her departure from Elmstone, and a few words added by herself at the close.

"I fear, Mrs. Rowe," he said, when he had looked through the papers and made their contents definitely known to her; "that you have done this poor boy a great wrong by withholding these papers from their rightful owners. It is quite plain that he is Mr. Ravenscroft's lawful son and heir."

"In a workhouse," said Mrs. Rowe grimly. She did not appear to feel much penitence for the wrong that she had done.

"These papers must be transmitted to Mr. Ravenscroft at once," he said, "together with the information that his child still lives. I am afraid that he will not look upon you henceforward with much favour."

"He won't be troubled with me," said Hester Rowe abruptly. "I've long meant to leave Netherby and now I'll go, to save myself being turned out—for this cottage belongs to the Ravenscrofts. I'll tell you what you may do for me, if you had any love for Davy—keep silence till to-morrow morning. By that time I

shall be far enough, and you may send Gaston Ravenscroft to look for his son in the workhouse or the prison as soon as it may suit you."

Maurice was silent for a moment. "I will wait till to-morrow morning," he said, "but then I must tell the whole story. But what will you do? Have you money? have you friends?"

"Plenty. More than I need."

"Have you no regret for the wrong that you must have done—the suffering——"

"What suffering? Ravenscroft has not suffered. If he had, he would have looked after the child. It was by his wish that the child was taken to the workhouse. Hervey will know what became of it. Perhaps it is dead; for it's plain that they wanted it out of the way. If it is dead, find out how it died. And if it is living, tell Ravenscroft from me that I hope it lives to be a sorrow and a disgrace to him. He cast off the child, knowing what he did; it was not my place to run after him and give him back his wife's papers, though he might have had them—and the child too—for aught I cared. There, take the papers and go; I've got rid of them at last and I'm glad of it. They've been like a nightmare to me for the last few months and years."

Maurice rose to go. "I will do my best to do what you have left undone so long," he said. "Let me tell you one thing before I go, Mr. Rowe; your son Davy forgave Gaston Ravenscroft fully and freely before he died. He would never have avenged Lucy's wrongs in the way you thought that he would do."

"Davy was always soft," repeated the old woman. "I don't forgive so easily."

And then she buried her face in her hands and would not speak another word.

Thus Maurice left her. He never saw her again. Before night she had quitted her cottage, and the little world of Netherby knew her no more.





CHAPTER XX.

NETHERBY MANOR.

WHEN Maurice had left the cottage, he seated himself on a well-shaded bank in the lane, and made a further examination of the papers which he had brought away with him. He placed the certificates by themselves in his own pocket-book; then he looked at the locket, which had been wrapped in a fine embroidered handkerchief: it was a massive gold locket with a diamond in the centre. Zaranoff closed it and covered it once more with the handkerchief in which he rightly guessed that Lucy had laid it first.

The other paper remained to be read: one which Zaranoff had not as yet well understood. That was the anonymous letter. Maurice pondered over its phrases for some time, wondering whether the writer could have known their cruelty. "This letter is from one who wishes you well and

is sorry to see you so deceived. . . . You are not his wife, and that is why he hides you from the world. . . . If you have any rights, claim them at once."

At the end of the letter these words were written in a straggling, uncertain hand (Lucy's hand):

"I am going to Netherby to claim my rights. If I am not Gaston's wife, let him tell me so and let me know the truth. He is far away—I do not know where he has gone. But whether he has deceived me or not, I am sure that Davy will be kind to me and Bertie, and I will go to him."

She had gone to him then ; and, at any rate, she had never known that Davy's kindliness of heart had been so far soured that he refused for a time to help and protect the poor little boy whom he thought to be Lucy's shame.

Maurice began to understand the story. The one point upon which he was not reassured was Gaston's conduct to his wife. Either he had deceived her cruelly (so thought Zaranoff) or he had been wickedly careless of her happiness. If he had loved her he would certainly have made inquiries respecting her death and the boy's disappearance. It seemed to Maurice that it would be a good thing to have the whole matter sifted to the bot-

tom. In spite of his better judgment, he had been somewhat infected by Davy's fear of the influence that Ravenscroft was likely to acquire over Vera de Lusignan. It would be well that Vera should know for herself what manner of man he was. A curious sequence of events had placed Maurice Zaranoff in the position of an inquirer into the facts of Ravenscroft's early life, and he was determined to pursue the investigation as far as possible. It was quite imaginable that the child had been taken away from the workhouse by Ravenscroft himself; if so, his present position would be easily discovered and the money left to him by David Rowe could be placed at once in the hands of the boy's father. But Maurice could not rid himself of the idea that there was some mysterious obstacle in the way of his discovering the lad, whom the papers in his possession taught him to call Bertram Ravenscroft.

He made his way at once to Mickleham workhouse, where he saw the master and made the necessary inquiries. No obstacle was here, at least, placed in his way: books and lists were consulted for him, old attendants and officials questioned; the result being that no record could be found either of the child's admittance or of his

departure, and that all the persons concerned declared with one voice that no boy of the name of Bertram Moore (Maurice knew that it was useless to mention the name of Ravenscroft) had ever entered the Mickleham workhouse.

And yet Hester Rowe and David Rowe had both declared that Mr. Hervey himself took the boy away from the cottage "to the poorhouse." Naturally it occurred to Maurice that he had better see Mr. Hervey and question him upon the subject. He therefore, without hesitation, inquired his way to Netherby Manor.

Mr. Hervey's house stood in an inclosure of park and garden, which seemed intended to seclude it entirely from the outer world, although it was really within ten minutes' walk of Netherby and of Ravenscroft Hall. It was a roomy, comfortable-looking house, built of red brick and mantled in three centuries' growth of ivy: the lawn, shrubbery, and gravelled carriage-drive before the door were all exquisitely kept, although the garden lacked the adornment of ribbon flower-beds and the brilliant parterres of red, yellow, and blue, which would have been the delight of Madame Waldstein's eyes.

Maurice rang the bell, and was admitted without delay into a wide paved hall, with a carved

ceiling of which the owner of the house was justly proud. Thence he was taken into a dimly-lighted room, where he found himself, rather unexpectedly, in the presence of Mr. Hervey.

The room into which he had been ushered was one which commended itself to Maurice's artistic eye. It was evidently a sort of study, for it contained low bookcases and writing-tables, but the look of exquisite order and precision about the place made Maurice conjecture that very little real work was done in it. Some fine engravings hung upon the walls, and a little blue china testified to Mr. Hervey's appreciation of the latest fashion; but his taste had not run riot in that direction, for the decoration was of the sober kind, even ecclesiastical in tone, the curtains being black and gold, and the vases on the well-draped mantelpiece of brass, and decidedly suggestive of church festivals.

Mr. Hervey, a spare man, rather under than over the middle height, severely dressed in black, rose from his chair as Maurice entered and inclined his head politely. At the same time, however, he cast a rather scrutinising glance at his visitor. He had a striking face, of which the paleness was thrown into strong relief by the style of dress that he had adopted, which made him look

like an Oxford professor or a schoolmaster of the clerical type rather than a country squire in his study on a summer morning. His features had preserved the fineness and delicacy of younger years: eyelid, nostril, mouth, the traits which first betray the advance of approaching years, were still as finely and sharply modelled as those of an antique cameo. His hair was iron-gray; there was none on his face, and that which remained upon his head was rather scanty.

"In what way can I serve you, Mr. Guyon?" said Mr. Hervey graciously. His voice was low and a little monotonous, but almost anxiously conciliatory. His cold gray eyes dwelt on Maurice with careful scrutiny for a moment, and were then dropped upon his hands, which were certainly remarkable for their beauty. Maurice remembered afterwards that Mademoiselle de Lusignan had just such long, slender, exquisitely shaped white hands as these.

"I have ventured to trouble you," said Zaranoff, "with respect to a business matter in which I am concerned."

Mr. Hervey slightly raised his eyebrows. "Is it not a pity, then," he said courteously, "that you should apply to me in the first instance? I give little attention to business at present.

My solicitor acts for me. It is not my *métier* exactly."

"I fear that your solicitor might not be able to answer the question which I wish to ask."

"That is odd," said Mr. Hervey, leaning back in his chair and surveying his visitor with a smile which veiled a sort of cool contempt. "Pray let me hear your question, Mr.—er— Guyon. I trust that I may be able to answer it."

"I trust so too. It is an easy one."

"Then I may all the more readily express a hope that your business may be stated with as little delay and as much lucidity as possible," said Mr. Hervey. "I am unfortunately very much engaged at present." He laid his hand upon a number of the *Westminster Review* which stood upon a table at his side with a sheet of notepaper protruding from its leaves, and looked as if he were half inclined to reopen it. "My business faculties are not great," he continued in the same tone. "I am a recluse, and have lived for many years only in the world of thought."

Maurice was somewhat provoked by this statement, but passed it over and came to the point at once.

"I am one of the trustees for a sum of money, Mr. Hervey," he said firmly, "which was left a

short time ago to a boy who is probably known by the name of Bertram Moore, the child of a certain Lucy Moore who died in this village about fourteen years ago."

Mr. Hervey raised his eyes from the *Review*, and fixed them upon Maurice with an expression of watchful attention. But his pale keen face showed no other sign of special attention to the subject.

"Yes, Mr. Guyon?"

"Lucy Moore," continued Zaranoff, who did not mean to divulge the fact of Lucy's marriage until after a consultation with Vera, "Lucy Moore died at the house of a Mrs. Rowe, near the churchyard, and this boy was left in Mrs. Rowe's care. Mrs. Rowe informs me that you removed the boy from her cottage in order to place him in the Mickleham Workhouse. It is a very curious thing, sir, that although I have made close inquiries at this workhouse, no trace of the boy's entrance there can be found. I suppose, therefore, that you placed him in some other institution under the care of some other person; and, as I am interested in tracing him, I have come to you to know where he may be found."

There was a pause—a very slight pause—

before Mr. Hervey spoke. A slight fine smile crossed his face as he did so.

"Your demand for information (it is scarcely to be called a *question*, my dear sir) has in it the ring of a noble enthusiasm in the cause of others, which smacks of youth and—if I may say so—of inexperience. You can scarcely expect an old man like myself to be interested so readily in persons of whom he knows nothing. The circumstances to which you refer must, I fear, have slipped out of my memory."

"You mean that you do not remember taking the boy away from Mrs. Rowe's cottage?"

Mr. Hervey mused, with his finger on his cheek.

"It is curious how little one's mind retains of events of that sort," he murmured reflectively. "And yet I have a good memory—but a treacherous one. That may sound inconsistent to you, Mr. Guyon?"

"Yes, rather," said Maurice.

"'Consistency,' as Emerson has well remarked—Emerson—an American author, with whose writings you, Mr. Guyon, as a foreigner (a Frenchman, perhaps, if I am not mistaken: no?) may not be very intimately acquainted—'consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.' I make no claim to consistency——"

"Pardon me," said Maurice, who believed that the old man was talking merely for the sake of gaining time ; "pardon me if I remind you that I, like yourself, have many engagements at present, and that consistency——"

"Consistency has nothing to do with the matter in hand ? Exactly so," said Mr. Hervey pleasantly. "I am much obliged to you for reminding me of that fact, Mr. Guyon. I am an old fool, no doubt, and love to talk about myself as all old fools do ; but after all, what is it that Pascal says ? ' Man is so much of a fool that it would be a species of folly not to be a fool.' I do not defend my folly. And, in the meantime, I begin to remember the matter to which you have alluded. But I am afraid I cannot be of any assistance to you in the matter." He stopped short, and eyed Maurice for a moment with what seemed to be a calculating look.

"You can be of very great assistance to me," said Zaranoff, "if you will tell me where that boy is at the present moment."

Mr. Hervey's lips parted in a somewhat enigmatic smile. "If I could tell you that, Mr. Guyon," he remarked, "I should solve the problem which has perplexed mankind from the time of Socrates and Marcus Aurelius to the days of

our modern Agnosticism, which always strikes me, by the by, as so curious a *réchauffé* of philosophy after the manner of the ancients—

‘ That undiscovered country, from whose bourn——’

You know the lines ?——”

“Do you mean to say, Mr. Hervey, that the boy of whom I speak is dead ?” inquired Maurice.

Mr. Hervey bowed. “You relieve me of an unpleasant task, Mr. Guyon. I was about to mention the occurrence when you—so obligingly—interrupted me.”

“Then,” said Maurice, unmindful of the sneer with which these words were accompanied, “you can no doubt inform me of the circumstances under which he died, and give me some legal proof of his death, as the money left him must necessarily pass to another person, and I presume that some such evidence will be required.”

“Is the sum a large one ?”

“Not particularly.”

“Oh, well, Mr. Guyon, the boy of whom we are speaking died, unfortunately, soon after he left the Rowses’ cottage. I did not take him to the workhouse on the day when he quitted Mrs. Rowe’s cottage ; he had a bed here for a night or two, and, before he could be removed, he was

taken ill. He was ill—not seriously so, but slightly ill—for some little time; and I was quite relieved when some friends of his made their appearance and claimed him. They took him away with them; and I afterwards heard from them that he was—as you very justly inferred, Mr. Guyon—dead.”

“Who took him away from you then?” asked Maurice in some astonishment.

“At this distance of time,” said Mr. Hervey blandly, “I regret to say that I am unable to give you the name of the persons who took him away from Netherby.”

“Could you not ascertain, sir?”

Mr. Hervey ruminated. “Possibly,” he said, as if in doubt. “Possibly. If you would call again to-morrow, Mr. Guyon, I might perhaps give you more information. I could consult old papers—my servants—other sources——” He did not seem to finish the sentence, but stopped rather suddenly.

“Then I will call again to-morrow morning,” said Maurice after a little pause. “I should very much like to know the name of the friends who took the boy away.”

“I have no doubt you would, Mr. Guyon,” said his interlocutor with another enigmatic look.

“If you like to return at twelve o’clock to-morrow morning, I shall be happy to tell you the result of my investigations. Will you take some lunch before you go, Mr. Guyon? No? Then I must say good morning, I suppose.”

Left alone, Mr. Hervey relapsed into meditation of a somewhat subtle kind, which caused him, by and by, to rise and search for a passage in a book that had occurred to him as possibly appropriate to the matter in hand. He found it in a volume of Pope’s prose works, and, being fond of quotations, he immediately transcribed it in his private notebook. “He who tells a lie is not sensible how great a task he undertakes,” said the poet of Twickenham; “for he must be forced to invent twenty more to maintain one.” An apt quotation!

Meantime Maurice went to his inn to dine and rest, for the heat of the sun and the fatigues of the day had given him a remarkably severe headache. Towards evening he felt slightly better, and went out for a stroll about the town, striking, after a time, into the highroad which led to Netherby. The sun was sinking and a refreshing coolness filled the air. He found himself in the narrow lane which led to the lower end of the churchyard. He passed by Hester Rowe’s cot-

tage. It had a deserted look; the door was wide open, but neither light nor sound came from it. He paused a moment, then turned away and entered the churchyard. Here he spent some little time in trying to discover Lucy's grave, but his search for it was fruitless. He crossed himself, however, as he passed along the path-way and murmured a prayer for her repose,—like most Poles (and he was of Polish origin) Maurice was a peculiarly devout man,—but he walked to the other side of the churchyard, where a hedge and a small gate divided it from a plantation of fir-trees. Beyond this plantation there lay a garden, which he could not see; and beyond this garden a trim white house with a broad verandah, also invisible to his eyes at present, but which, as he had taken care to ascertain, was the home of Baroness Waldstein. Its chimneys were just visible to him through the trees.

The scene was curiously lonely. Behind him lay the sloping churchyard, with its lush green grass, trimly-kept mounds, and upright grave-stones around the ivy-mantled church. He turned and leaned against the gate with his back to the plantation for some little time, in order to contemplate the quiet place. The long summer twilight was closing in, the yew-trees and firs

stood motionless against a background of clear evening sky. The colours of buildings, flowers, fields, were beginning to blend in one harmonious darkness of tinting; the birds uttered a few drowsy notes at intervals, and then were still. Zaranoff yielded to the fascination of such a calm; he drew a deep breath, folded his arms, and delivered himself up to quiet meditation. In a few minutes he found that he was humming to himself a few notes of some music to which he had listened with Frank Longmore two nights before. He stopped short, smiled, then sighed again.

“‘*Amor mi guiderà?*’” he said to himself. “‘Love will guide me’—‘hope, thou wilt comfort me?’—is that her trust, poor child? It is not much. *Amor mi guiderà*: is it love that has guided me to-day? What ‘spirit in my feet’ has brought me hither?”

He turned and looked at the house that lay behind the trees, measuring the distance with his eye. “Not far away,” he murmured. “What would she say if she knew that I was here?” Then he mused for a little time. “I have known *three* good women in my life, at least,” he said presently. “Is not that enough to keep up one’s faith in womanhood? My mother, Anna Stro-

lenski, Vera de Lusignan. It is unlucky when a man's first love cannot be found in a list of that kind."

His hand sought the fastenings of the gate. Slowly, and as it were reluctantly, he opened and passed through it. He left the pathway amongst the fir-trees, and threaded his way over a carpet of moss and fir-needles in which his foot sank every moment, until he reached the edge of the plantation which bordered upon the lawn. This fir-grove was higher than the garden. He stood upon a bank which descended several feet towards the flower-beds and smooth-shaven sward. He could see the lights of the house; he could hear a faint sound of music from the drawing-room. The windows were open, and two or three figures were moving upon the verandah.

Suddenly he paused. One lady had detached herself from the others, and was pacing the garden walks. She mounted steps that had been cut in the bank, and advanced towards him as though she had been aware of his presence, and wished to meet him face to face. He drew back, anxious to let her pass without being seen. But, as he stood between the dark upright stems of the fir-trees, she turned, and suddenly showed him a white and startled face. Then she drew back,

uttering a half-stifled cry. But it was too late ; she had seen him and he had seen her. It was Ilma Zaranoff—the woman who would now have been his wife if she had not cruelly and shamelessly deserted him in his hour of need.





CHAPTER XXI.

A WOMAN'S VENGEANCE.

FOR a moment there was silence. Then Maurice drew himself up, lifted his hat ceremoniously and said :

“I had not the least intention of forcing myself upon you, madame. I will not trouble you any longer. I was a fool to come,” was his silent comment, “and I should be a still greater fool to stay.”

Little could be seen of Madame Zaranoff, for she wore a black dress and was enveloped in the folds of a long black lace veil which she had thrown over her head and wound about her neck and waist, but from the little that could be seen it was plain that she was in prey to some deadly terror. Her face was white, her eyes looked strained and wild as she grasped at the trunk of a tree for support, panted and crossed herself

repeatedly. Much as Zaranoff desired to leave her, he felt that he must reassure her first.

"I am no ghost, Ilma," he said quietly. "I have been in England some months and, although I do wish for an interview with you, I should not purposely seek it in this way. Accident had brought me face to face with you again, and I think that I had better say what I have to say and then bid you farewell."

The Countess took her hands away from the bole of the fir-tree and clasped them together with a despairing gesture. She was a remarkably graceful woman but not devoid of little affectations, and Maurice knew her well enough to feel convinced that by this time her continued show of fear was somewhat artificial. Even the trembling of her white hands did not move him, nor the look of mingled supplication and terror in her beautiful brown eyes.

"Why are you here?" she said at last in a quivering voice. "I thought you were in Siberia. Did you escape? You are not—*pardoned*?"

"Oh no, madame, I am not pardoned," said Zaranoff coldly. "I escaped. You need have no fear about your estates: I do not think that there is any chance of the Emperor's wishing to restore them to—their original owner."

"But how did you escape? I thought escape was impossible."

"I think I had better not tell you how. You are in communication with many of our officials. You might accidentally report some of the facts in quarters which they are not intended to reach, and others would perhaps suffer. At present I believe that I am thought to be dead. It makes little difference in our relation to each other: I am dead to you."

"Then why did you seek me out? To frighten me, I suppose."

"I did not seek you out exactly, madame, did I? I never thought of meeting you to-night. I wandered by chance in this direction; it is the old story of the candle and the moth, I presume."

"What!" said Madame Zaranoff with a vivacity which she seemed half afraid to exhibit; "am I still the candle, and you the moth?"

As she spoke, she let the drapery fall back from her face a little: a beautiful well-rounded oval face, in which the eyes glowed like stars and the colour burnt in two feverish spots. Maurice took a step backward, and paused before he answered.

"You may still be the candle, madame, but—excuse me—I am no longer the moth."

She made a gesture of impatience. "Ah, that was always the way," she cried. "You are too cold—too self-contained, too English in your ways for me!"

Maurice bowed. "It is perhaps fortunate, then, that we are separated by circumstances," he said, with deliberate irony.

"Perhaps." Ilma seemed to grudge the concession. "At any rate," she said, "you must not come here: we might be discovered at any moment. Mrs. Ravenscroft thinks of the *convenances*; she might send out the servants in search of me at any moment if I disappeared, and then what would become of my reputation!"

"Ah, Ilma!" said Maurice with irrepressible bitterness, "you were always so careful of your reputation!"

She laughed. "I had cause to be, when my affianced husband perilled his—and mine—so lightly! Hush! they are coming to look for me—I am sure of it. I must go."

Maurice stretched out his hand and laid it on her arm. "No," he said, "not yet."

"What do you want?" she asked defiantly. "Do you wish to detain me by force? Don't

hold me : do not touch me : I am going back to the house."

He simply said "No," and held her lightly by the wrist, but the moment that she tried to break away his grasp closed upon her firmly.

"Maurice," she said, in a frightened voice, using his name for the first time, "you hurt me."

"I am very sorry. If you keep still I shall not hurt you. I have something to say before you go."

"Can't you come again?" she pleaded. "If we were seen, it would be so very—compromising."

"I have no security that you ever would see me again," he answered. "You might deny me admittance. Be silent a moment and we shall be safe enough."

He added this counsel because voices and footsteps were heard approaching. Still holding her hand he drew back with her into the dense shadow of the trees. Meanwhile two gentlemen both in evening dress, walked across the lawn before the terrace and passed down the gravelled walk between the lawn and the plantation. One of these was Gaston Ravenscroft; the other, = much younger man, was a visitor, and a strange= to Zaranoff.

"Where has she gone?" said the younger of the two. "The last thing I saw of her was when she declared that she must go and look at the glowworms on the bank. Madame Zaranoff! are you here?"

"Not likely," said Ravenscroft dryly. "Madame Zaranoff does not love the cold dews and evening breezes of the English climate."

"Where are you, Countess?" said the young man in a laughing voice. "Hiding, I expect!—Ah, there she is!"

Ilma gave a nervous start, but the gentlemen were both looking away from the grove in which she was sheltering herself. Her hands closed fiercely on Maurice's arm; he stood like a rock and made no sign.

"She is not here," said the elder man. "She must have gone indoors again. We will send Olivia to look for her presently. Shall we go in?"

They bent their steps leisurely towards the house. Ilma drew herself away from Count Zaranoff with a great sigh of relief.

"Thank Heaven!" she said hastily. "I shall have a little time free, then. I can give you ten minutes. What do you want of me, Maurice Zaranoff? Money?"

“None of *your* money, Madame. But I may as well mention to you that Sir Adrian Longmore has consented to receive for me the money from that little estate of my mother’s on the German side of the frontier. *That* could not be confiscated by the Emperor.”

She laughed lightly. “It is as I expected. Really, you are too melodramatic! In romances the discarded lover always turns up and demands money as the price of his silence. How conventional you are, Maurice!”

“Pardon, madame,” said Zaranoff very quietly. “I do not ask for your money or for anything at all from you. I think that for the sake of old days you ought to know me better than to think that my silence could be bought.”

“Unfortunately, I found out that I never had known you aright. Since then I have expected nothing from you—nothing but treachery and deceit.”

Maurice was silent for a moment. “Have you indeed so little respect for me as that?” he said in a low, moved voice. “Ilma, *what* have I done to make you think so ill of me? I have not deserved this treatment: before God, I declare that I have not.”

“So ‘little respect’ for you?” she said insol-

ently. "Little! I have none at all. Really, you ask too much, Maurice. Money, if you like, but—respect!"

"And why not respect?" he asked in a sterner tone. "On whose side does the reproach lie? What wrong had I done to you when you cast me off? I am not sorry now for our separation, Ilma, for I know well enough that we should not have made each other happy; but for you to reproach me in the way you do is simply contemptible and absurd. I will hear no more of it. Tell me what you have been saying about me to Sir Adrian Longmore, and then I will go."

"I have only told the truth," she answered, quailing a little beneath the sternness of his voice.

"What truth? What do you mean?"

"Go and ask him," she said, turning away her face, but speaking haughtily. "You cannot expect me to repeat it to you."

"But I do expect it," he said, taking her by her hands and holding them gently enough but in such a way that she could not escape. "I must know before we leave this place. Sir Adrian Longmore asked whether I was to blame for the rupture of our engagement. I answered 'Yes,' thinking of the shame and misery that my imprisonment and exile would have brought upon

you ; refusing to blame you even to one who has been to me a second father ; but his indignation was so great that I knew—too late—that you had accused me——”

“ I accused you only of what all the world was well aware,” said Ilma, passionately snatching one of her hands away, “ of your connection with Anna Strolenski—an insult to me and a scandal to your whole family.”

“ What ! ” he exclaimed, like one bewildered. “ You thought that I—that Anna Strolenski and I—good Heaven, Ilma, are you mad ? ”

“ No,” she answered bitterly, “ I am only too clear-sighted. I told Sir Adrian that the reason why I gave you up was that I had discovered your love for another woman. Anna Strolenski was your mistress.”

“ And you *dared* ”—with terrible emphasis on the words—“ *you dared* to malign me so ? ”

She was silent, biting her lip and trying to free the hand that still remained in Maurice’s firm grasp. He paused, but, obtaining no reply, went on with scorn and indignation vibrating through every one of his clear low tones.

“ You dared—yes, you dared to say it in order to cover your own faithlessness, your own cowardice, your own fear of poverty and exile ! I was

far away in Siberia, and you might safely say of me what you chose. And you have succeeded well: you have saved your reputation and figured as the deeply-injured blameless woman who had a good reason for breaking with the exile—not what you really were, Ilma, heartless, fickle, and cold! I did not come to bandy reproaches with you: I could forgive the rest; I could forgive your cruel message to me after the trial, your marriage, everything—but I cannot forgive you for blackening my character in the eyes of that upright, pure-minded, honourable old man, who thinks me a scoundrel and a profligate. I understand now what he meant. Oh, Ilma, you might have spared me this!”

He dropped her hand, turned away and leaned against a tree with face averted that she might not see the hot tears of rage and bitterness that had gathered in his eyes. She watched him steadily for a few moments and then began to speak with a sort of wonder and interest in her tone.

“Why do you take it so much to heart!” she said. “What does it matter if General Longmore thinks ill of you? Besides, he will not long think ill of you for a thing like that: no man does. You injured *me*, no doubt; and I

have a right to be angry about it ; but other people do not think that you have done anything very bad. That is the worst of it—for me. Sir Adrian was very kind—very sympathetic, very indignant with you of course ; but even I do not expect him to carry his anger with him to the grave. He is not my relation : if he were, of course he would resent my wrongs. But a woman's wrongs"—she shrugged her shoulders contemptuously—"are not of much account in the world. I am not a schoolgirl, fresh from the convent, now : I know what society demands."

"And I know what right and truth and honour demand," said Maurice hoarsely. "I used to think, like you, of the claims of society and the world ; now, Ilma, I think also of what God demands."

She studied his face with curious, cold intentness.

"Are you going to turn monk, Maurice ? Do you know that you are very much altered ?"

"Probably, madame ; a man does not return from Siberia as he went."

"I suppose not. I suppose that it has changed you from a boy into a man. I grew tired of you in the old days, Maurice ; you were only a gay

gallant lad, with a wild notion of instructing the moujiks, while I was a woman grown. I grew weary of the contrast between us; but now—now you are a man, in whom a woman might find her match. What is it that has worked the change?”

She paused for a reply: but he vouchsafed her none.

“Some woman has done it,” she resumed quickly, but in a very low tone—“who?”

“Yourself: Ilma von Löwenstein—Ilma Zaranoff.”

“I wish it were,” she answered, lifting her eyes to his face with the same strange look, and then dropping them as suddenly. “If I had done it, I should worship you.”

“I do not want you to worship me,” he said dryly. “I want you not to slander me.”

“Oh,” she said, changing her tone again to that of contemptuous irony, “it is the old story. You do not understand a woman’s nature, and you never will. What resource was left to me? Even if I had had no tangible cause of complaint against you, I must have said something. You outraged my feelings in every possible way by your adherence to the ultra-Liberal party. I saw that you were bent on ruining yourself and

me, and you expected me to hold my tongue! You expect me now not to justify myself by every means in my power. *You* might act in that way, men are such miracles of virtue; but a woman when she is hurt cries out; when she is attacked fights; when she is wronged avenges herself."

"Not every woman."

"Oh no! your ideal, of course, was Anna Strolenski." Then, as he winced and made a gesture as if to silence her, she changed her tone and attitude. She came close to him, placed one hand on his shoulder and the other on his arm, and looked up into his face with a lithe insinuating grace.

"Confess, Maurice," she said, "confess the truth and I will forgive you all the harm that you have done. You are a man, and I can understand how you were tempted. Tell me the whole truth, and I shall be cured of any lingering feeling of remorse or any foolish tenderness that I may have harboured for yourself. *What* was Anna Strolenski to you, and what were you to Anna Strolenski?"

He looked down at her quietly, but with a sudden heaving of his chest. "You ask that," he said, "after what you said to Sir Adrian?"

"I only said what I thought. He wanted to know why I had left you. And that *was* the reason—before Heaven that was the reason, Maurice!" said the woman, with a burst of passion which made her quiver from head to foot. "If I had thought that you did not love her more than you loved me, I would never have left you—never, never! You thought that I cared for warmth and luxury and excitement; and you are right, they are like the breath of my life to me; but love is more than life, Maurice, and my place would have been at your side. If I had believed that you loved me——"

"If you had believed that I loved you, Ilma, you would have acted precisely as you did then," said Maurice, with a passionless calm that no words of hers were able to disturb. "It is a pity to deceive yourself or to try to deceive me. I understand; I have always understood."

"Oh no!" said Ilma, withdrawing herself from him with flashing eyes and sobbing breath. "No, that you never did—you never will!"

"Ah, well; it cannot be helped now. I did not mean to upbraid you for the past. But as regards Anna Strolenski——"

"Yes," said the Countess, confronting him eagerly, "as regards Anna Strolenski—well?"

"To begin with," said Maurice seriously, "understand that she is dead."

"Dead! how?"

"Am I to tell you how she died?"

"Of course; were you with her?"

"I was present; I was compelled to be present. Anna Strolenski is a saint, a martyr, Ilma. She died for her country and her friends."

"For *you*?"

"No, not in the least for me. Listen, and see whether you cannot resolve to abandon your insane and utterly unfounded jealousy of Anna Strolenski. Do me justice now, at least. Her brother was my dearest friend. She and he both held advanced views; they were what the newspapers call Nihilists of the most pronounced type—Nihilists of Bakunin's school, advocating the destruction of all existing institutions. I did not sympathise with these opinions; but I admired the pure and lofty characters of many of the men and women who held them. After the Moscow attempt I sheltered Casimir Strolenski and his sister in my own house: you know well enough with what results. Neither my rank nor my official position protected me. We were betrayed. . . . I never asked who betrayed us. . . ."

He stopped for a moment, but kept his face averted. She did not move: he heard a sort of catch in her breath, and seemed to listen as if for a word from her, but none came.

"Strolenski was taken, and I was arrested for defending him. We were all imprisoned, as you know. Strolenski was condemned to death. Anna, being liberated through some mistake, made, with her friends, a wild attempt to raise the city on his behalf. She was taken in the act—at bay, in a little room, defending herself and others, with a pistol in her hand. She was flogged in the presence of the other prisoners at Karkoff, as a menace and a warning: you can guess the sequel. She was delicate in health, lame and sickly; the day was bitterly cold; when they released her she fell down with her face to the ground of the courtyard—I saw her fall; when they lifted her up she was dead."

A shudder ran through the listener's frame, but she did not speak.

"Ilma," said Zaranoff earnestly, "when I heard just now that you had profaned her memory by saying that she and I were lovers, I knew that you could not know the story of her life and death. Loyal as I was to an Emperor whom I personally loved and trusted, her fate

almost made me a traitor! But it was not his fault: he does not know the truth. She died under the lash, because she would not accuse her friends: do you understand me, Ilma? and you—you can traduce her now that she is dead? Your sole excuse is that you did not know the truth."

After a little pause, Madame Zaranoff spoke again.

"I know—your version of it," she said.

"Do you in your inmost heart doubt me, Ilma?"

"I only know this," she said bitterly, "that if it was not Anna Strolenski, it was some other woman who came between us."

"No," he said firmly: "you cannot say that. You and my mother and she were the only three women in the world for whom I cared."

"Then it was your mother who came between us," she said blindly. "She whom you were always quoting—always holding up as a model to me—do you think I could bear it? do you think that I was not human? I was obliged to revenge myself in some way: and I made you suffer, even as you had made me. And now supposing that I believed your story, what is the use? What could I do?"

"You could clear her name, at least, said Maurice indignantly. "Let the world know her as she was; or, if not the world, at least those friends of mine whose opinion is dearer to me than that of all the world beside."

"And what should I say? Pretend that I had discovered something new? I could only say that I had your word for your innocence; and *that* we all know that you gave us long ago. Why should I injure my own reputation to save yours? Foolish old Sir Adrian would say, 'Marry him, now that the misapprehension has been cleared up.' And naturally, monsieur, I do not mean to marry you, for, if I did, what would become of the Zaranoff Palace, and the land near Kieff, and the other estates in Livonia? The Czar would soon declare that he had found a more faithful subject upon whom to bestow them, and I should be recalled to St. Petersburg and deported perhaps to Mesen or the Caucasus?"

"Do not disturb yourself, madame," Maurice rejoined. "There is no likelihood that such an event will ever come to pass."

"How do you know?" she said sharply. "Is there no one for whom I would peril my safety, do you think?"

"I do not know. You did not peril it for

me—happily, madame. I trust that you will never need to peril it at all.”

She turned and came quite close to him. “Maurice,” she said almost in a whisper, “do you know that I could find it in my heart to tell you something? Shall I tell you?”

He felt her trembling hands seeking his, but at that moment he had not the strength to be pitiful. “Go on, Ilma,” he said coldly.

“I could tell you if I thought that you would ever forgive me! But I do not think you know how to forgive. Maurice! Maurice!” She clung to him with a sort of appeal in her voice and eyes, which he could not quite withstand. “Be a little kinder to me and I will say everything you want.”

“What can I do?” he sighed; but he put his arm round her, yielding as he had often yielded before to the fascination of her looks and words. “Well, Ilma?”

“Tell me,” she murmured, “have you—since you left St. Petersburg—seen any woman whom you loved as—as you loved your mother—or as you loved Anna Strolenski! I will not say—as you loved me.” She chose her words with care.

“Since I left St. Petersburg?” he asked, as if he hardly understood her.

"Yes: since *she* died. Tell me this—and I will tell you—something that you do not know."

"My love for my mother—my friendship for Anna Strolenski—could not easily be given to others, Ilma. As to my love for you—I know that it is a bitter offence to tell a woman that one's love for her is dead, but it is better that you should know the truth. I loved you once,—I shall love no woman in the way that I once loved you,—but now you are no more to me than any other woman. You are not even the adopted sister that you were when I knew you first."

"Can you look at me, Maurice, and say so with all your heart?" she murmured, leaning against him and looking up into his face. But he took away his arm, and put her from him.

"You claimed your freedom some time ago, Ilma; I claim mine too."

Her face changed. She drew back her lips from her white teeth; a fierce light came into her eyes.

"I knew it," she said. "If it was not Anna Strolenski, it was some one else. I was right in the main."

"No, Ilma," he cried, with passion equal to her own. "I swear that it was not so. I was true to you in word and thought and deed."

But she, flinging the black drapery over her head and holding it closely around her face with fingers on which the diamonds glittered in the moonlight, glided from him without another word. He saw her cross the lawn like a black shadow, and enter at an open door: then, with a sigh, he turned away, crashed through the brambles and tangled underwood of the plantation, and thence passed into the churchyard and the narrow lane beyond.





CHAPTER XXII.

“ A LITTLE WHILE A LITTLE LOVE.”

AFTER Maurice's departure Mr. Hervey remained, as we have already noted, for some time absorbed in thought. The sound of a fresh boyish voice singing as its owner passed the open window aroused him from his reverie. His brow cleared; he rose from his chair and went to the window, pushed back the heavy curtain, and looked out.

“ I beg your pardon, sir. I had forgotten that you were there,” said Lance apologetically. He was standing in the garden with a tame jackdaw on his arm ; he was trying to make the bird eat something from his mouth. The sunshine fell full upon his pleasant thoughtful face, his pensive dark eyes, and waving brown hair. Mr. Hervey did not look as though he found the picture unattractive.

“ Where have you been ?” he asked.

"At the Hall," said Lance, the colour rising to his pale cheek. "There is a Russian countess staying with Madame Waldstein; Olivia swears by her."

"One of the Baroness' foreign friends," said Mr. Hervey, a little contemptuously. "Is Gaston Ravenscroft at home?"

"No. He comes back in time for dinner. There are some people dining there."

"Whom you are *not* invited to meet," said Mr. Hervey in his most sarcastic tone.

Lance turned crimson.

"Why should I be, Uncle Richard?" he said, looking up with so clear and candid a gaze that Mr. Hervey's eyes fell uneasily. "A fellow of my age is not usually invited to dinner parties."

Richard Hervey smiled. "That depends," he said dryly.

"Well, at any rate," said Lance, stroking the feathers of his bird, "I am not likely to be asked there much so long as Mr. Ravenscroft is at the Hall. It is quite evident that he detests me, though I don't know why."

A gleam of mirth shot forth from Mr. Hervey's cold gray eyes. "Do you detest *him*?" he asked.

"I? no; I don't know that I do," said Lance.

"I don't like him much; I think he is very difficult to get on with, but——"

"But what?"

"He attracts me. I should like to know more of his Eastern life. I am sure that he must have had some awfully interesting adventures. It's a pity that he has such an antipathy to me, isn't it?" He laughed as he spoke, but his brow clouded.

Mr. Hervey looked at him inquisitively. "My dear Lance," he said, "one of my principles in life has always been never to care for anybody who did not care for me."

Lance glanced up with eyes full of smiling affection and gratitude. "No, that can't be, uncle," he said, "for look how much you cared for me when I was a little chap, and couldn't bear you. Don't you remember?"

"And do you suppose that I should have done that without a motive?" said Mr. Hervey.

"I'm sure it was a good one," said Lance, with his sweet frank look. If Mr. Hervey winced he did not show that he did so. He smiled a little and seemed gratified.

"I would not go too much to the Hall if I were you," he said. "Gaston was never very civil to me and mine. You had better keep out of his way."

"But Olivia!——" said the lad, and then stopped short.

"Well! Olivia! What of her?"

"Oh," said Lance, with his vivid ingenuous blush, "it was only that I thought that ~~he~~ he would wonder why I stayed away."

"She will soon leave off wondering," said Mr. Hervey; "she is going to town. She will make other friends." Then in a sterner tone: "No trifling, Lance, I warn you: do not think too much of Olivia Ravenscroft; she is the last person in the world for you just yet. You are only a boy."

"But when I am older——" began the lad, with downcast eyes; but Mr. Hervey interrupted him.

"When you are older you will be quite at liberty to make a fool of yourself in any way you please. But this calf-love of yours—pardon the phrase; it is rough but expressive—is not worth a serious thought. Let me see no more of it for the present, if you please." Then he moved back from the window. "This heat is terrible," he said. "Do have the goodness, my dear boy, to come out of it, and try to exist in a civilised apartment. You may read to me; I know you like reading; and all things con-

sidered, you don't read badly," said Mr. Hervey, as he dropped the curtain, which softened the blaze of daylight in his room, and relapsed into his comfortable chair.

Lance was not anxious to read aloud ; he had had his own plans for the afternoon ; but he renounced them without a word, and seated himself in the shaded room, which he hated, and read aloud the *Westminster*, which he hated still more, with not even a shadow upon his brow. He treated Mr. Hervey with tenderness almost more than filial ; it was mingled with a graceful courtesy, which might have seemed artificial had its simplicity not shown it to proceed from the impulses of a loving heart. The boy's nature was dreamy, poetical, romantic ; he had not been trained in the habit of reserve by mixing with ordinary boys ; and his affections for his guardian flowed forth as naturally as that of a girl for her mother. To him Mr. Hervey showed himself in a very different light from the one in which he had appeared to Count Maurice Zaranoff. The old man took evident pleasure, although sometimes of a sardonic kind, in the ways and workings of the fresh young life beside him ; he seemed to exert himself to speak without irony and without harshness to the lad ; and when

habit became too strong for him, and satire or ill-humour would have its way, Lance listened, wondered, and apparently escaped unscathed.

When the reading was over, he went out of doors again; and betook himself down the road to Netherby for a stroll before dinner. The lane to the churchyard was one of his favourite walks; and it was here that he came face to face with Olivia, who had been visiting an old woman in the village. Of course he offered to carry her basket for her, and walked by her side as she went on her way.

"How meditative you look!" she exclaimed by and by. "What are you thinking of, Lance?"

"I was trying to remember some lines of poetry."

"And what were they?" said Olivia heedlessly.

Lance's sweet boyish face reddened, after its wont; but he fixed his soft dark eyes very earnestly on Olivia's, as he answered her with the words which he had been quoting to himself—

"A little while a little love
The hour yet bears for thee and me,
Who have not drawn the veil to see
If still our heaven be lit above."

"I don't understand poetry," said Olivia with her brilliant smile. "Why can't people say what they mean?—at least, that kind of poetry always puzzles me."

Lance went on quietly :

"A little while a little love
May yet be ours who have not said
The word it makes our eyes afraid
To know that each is thinking of.
Not yet the end : be our lips dumb
In smiles a little season yet :
I'll tell thee, when the end is come,
How we may best forget."

"Ah! that is not the ending I should have made," he said, interrupting himself. "They are sad verses, are they not? They don't apply to us."

"No," said Olivia honestly, "they don't apply to us at all."

"Yet, the first part does, surely?" said Lance, with a tremor in his voice. "'A little love the hour yet bears for thee and me'—*that* is true; is it not, Olivia?"

He leaned towards her and laid his hand very lightly on hers. She hesitated, looked rather disconcerted, and coloured a little. "Of course, Lance," she said with some softness of tone; "you are one of our friends—one of *my* friends, I think I may say."

"A friend now, Olivia," said Lance, "but something more by and by? In days to come, when we are both older——"

"And wiser," she interpolated with an arch glance.

"Older and wiser—you will then give me leave to love you in a different way, will you not?"

"Ah," said Olivia with an intonation of playful scorn, "if you wait for *leave* to do it!"

"I won't wait then, I will do it now," returned Lance, possessing himself of the pretty white hand and kissing it with reverential tenderness. "I dared not say all that I had already dared to wish for—if not to hope—before. Oh, Olivia, don't you know that I love you better than all the world? I care for nobody but you—my beautiful lady, my queen Olivia! If I could make you a queen, dear, and I were your slave and could serve you night and day, don't you think that I would do it?"

"Lance, you are very foolish," said Miss Olivia. "You ought not to talk in this way: you are only a boy."

"I am older than you are, as you know," said Lance. "What has age to do with it? I love you, here and now; and I am quite sure

that my love will never change. I could die sooner than cease to love you, Olivia."

"Oh, hush," said Olivia, looking troubled. But she let her hand lie lightly in his and did not move away.

"Can you not say something to give me a little hope, Olivia? Tell me that you love me, just a little; and then I will be patient until the day comes when I may ask you to be my wife, and claim you from anybody who would try to come between us. Say something, dear, or I shall despair."

This pretty boyish love-making had brought the dimples to Olivia's cheeks and the laughter to her eyes; she was not displeased by it, but neither was she very much moved.

"What shall I say?" she asked him with a smile. "We are very happy as we are, Lance; there is no need to think about the future. I shall never forget you; I shall always care for you. That is enough, is it not?"

Enough, perhaps, for Lance's hopefulness at present; but sadly insufficient for the future, if this were all. But the boy had no misgivings.

"Dear Olivia!" he said. "I should be ashamed to ask you for more."

He did not try to kiss her cheek or to obtain

any further acknowledgment from her : he simply stood, holding her hand in his, and gazing with a young lover's eyes into the beautiful face which he hoped one day to call his own. She smiled back at him bravely and innocently : there was no trouble in her eyes, no bashful rise of colour in her cheeks. Few maidens could have been elevated to the position of dream-mistress, idol and queen even of a boy's heart, with less self-consciousness and unconcern than Olivia Ravenscroft at seventeen.

Mr. Hervey's words had only fanned the flame. There had been no absolute disapproval — indeed, a tacit consent had been given to Lance's wishes in one sentence : “ *When you are older, you may make a fool of yourself in any way you please.* ” The objection had been all on the score of youth ; and Lance thought this objection a very ineffective one. It gave a delicate zest to his courtship : the implied doubt of his constancy spurred him to more decided manifestations of love. He was too unworldly to dream that his want of wealth and connections might prove a serious barrier between him and Olivia Ravenscroft, sole heiress of a proud and wealthy house.

He accompanied Olivia across the plantation,

but no farther; and having watched her out of sight, returned with a quick light step and a contented mind to the society of Mr. Hervey for the rest of the evening.

It was later in the course of that same evening that Maurice Zaranoff met the Countess almost on the very spot at which Lance had parted from Olivia.

Zaranoff could not betake himself quietly to rest after his interview with Ilma. He had much self-control; but his nerves must have been made of iron to be unaffected by what had passed. Wound up to the highest pitch of excitement—his whole being shaken to its depths by cruel memories of the past—he wandered about the quiet roads and over the lonely beach until midnight had long sounded from the Mickleham steeple (with quaint chimes which had a curiously weird effect as they floated on the night-air down to the desolate sea-beach and mingled with the plashing of the waves); and when at last he strayed back to the quiet hostelry where he had taken up his quarters, he was spent with fatigue and exhaustion. And yet he could not sleep. The night was passed in tossings and turnings on his pillow; then came a period of nightmare dreams and feverish fancies; last of

all, in the morning hours, a heavy stupor which betokened illness rather than restful slumber.

Finding that he did not appear or respond to any summons at the door, the landlord himself made his entrance, and found his guest apparently unconscious, uttering only a few incoherent words when an attempt was made to rouse him. A doctor was summoned, and gave it as his opinion that the stranger was seriously ill; the brain was affected and the fever running high. A touch of sunstroke might be suspected; if not sunstroke there had been, at any rate, over-exertion, over-excitement, and a long and continued strain upon the constitution. And the next question was, What was to be done with the patient? for, if he had to be removed to the hospital, the removal must take place at once. In fact, the doctor hoped that it would not be necessary to move him, for such a removal might be attended with very bad results.

The landlady and the landlady's daughter both came to see the young and handsome man (whose fair moustache, grave blue eyes, and air of distinction they had much admired), now lying helpless and unconscious on a sick-bed. Both of them declared that it would be a shame to turn him out, and that they would nurse

him themselves rather than send him to a hospital.

The landlord had made a little examination of Maurice's effects before sending for a doctor. He had found money sufficient to justify him in believing that the expenses of the illness would be defrayed, and he was not averse to doing a kindly action if it could be done at little cost; but he was rather surprised to find no clue to the stranger's name. Fortunately, when Zaranoff returned from his late walk, ill and tired as he was, he had not rested before securing the papers which he had received from Hester Rowe in a packet, and sealing this packet with his signet-ring. This packet the landlord did not feel at liberty to touch, and placed it in the doctor's charge, as well as the money which he had found. He gave a somewhat reluctant consent to the proposition of his wife and daughter; but when his consent had once been given he waxed as hearty and as anxious as they in his goodwill to the sufferer and in arrangements for his welfare.

In putting away his clothes Mrs. Kirby, the landlady, made an important discovery—that of a notebook in one of his coat-pockets. The notebook, being subjected to minute inspection with that mixture of curiosity and real interest

in their guest which might have been expected, Mrs. Kirby and her daughter found a few memoranda in a language which they could not read, and then in a bold English hand, this name and address: "Frank Longmore, No. 99 Belgrave Square, London, W.," which they rashly concluded to be the name and address of the young man now lying before them.

"They're fine houses in Belgrave Square," said Mrs. Kirby with bated breath. "I thought he looked like a real gentleman. Not but what he's dressed poor, and real gentlemen don't usually come to *us*; but he has that sort of way with him that you can't be mistaken."

"No, indeed," said her daughter; "I never saw any one so gentleman-like—except, mebbe, Ravenscroft of Ravenscroft Hall. He's more my style, dark and tall; but this one, he's a regular aristocrat, he is."

"I think I'll write to this address," said the mother slowly. "It mayn't be his name, of course; but they may be friends of his. You write it, Jane; say that there's a fair gentleman been took ill here, and this name and address is the only one we can find on him. Direct it plain Mr. Longmore, and it'll reach somebody's eyes, no doubt."

And so it happened that on the following Monday Frank Longmore sought his father, with a very long face and an open letter in his hand.

"I say, General," he said, "will you listen to this letter?" And he read aloud Jane Kirby's rather flowery description of the fair-haired gentleman who had been taken ill under her father's roof, and in whose pocket-book they had found the name of "Frank Longmore." "Of course," said Frank, "it is Maurice."

"Evidently. What was he doing in Lincolnshire?"

Frank plucked at his dark moustache and made no answer for a few moments. "Don't you see, father," he said at last, rather uncertainly, "that—well, that the Countess Zaranoff is now staying at Madame Waldstein's, close to Mickleham, from which this person writes?"

"Oh," said the General. And he said nothing more.

Frank Longmore was on his way to Mickleham by the next train. Here he took possession of Maurice and Maurice's belongings, and informed the landlord and his wife of his own name and that of the patient. "I shall stay till Mr. Guyon is better," he said. And if Miss Kirby had before admired Maurice's blue eyes,

she admired still more the expressionless eyeglass and the cropped hair and moustache of Mr. Frank Longmore.

Frank devoted himself entirely to the service of his friend, until, after many days, Maurice woke up, weak indeed, but clear in mind and on fair way to convalescence. He could do little at first, in his waking intervals, but exchange a passing word or smile with Longmore; but at last one day he seemed to bethink himself of the outer world, and asked anxiously after his papers and other possessions. The sealed packet was delivered over to him, as well as his notebook, and at the sight of these he grew quieter; but presently Longmore heard him inquiring in uneasy tones whether there had been no letters or messages of any kind for him. There was, indeed, one letter; and this was immediately placed in his hands.

Maurice knew the handwriting, and made haste to tear open the envelope; but this proceeding was sadly impeded by his weakness. Frank watched him furtively, and was vexed to see the changes of colour and expression that swept across a face which illness had left sadly thin and haggard. The letter was dated a week back, and was signed "Vera de Lusignan."

Maurice had written her a note on his first arrival at Mickleham, and given her the name of the inn at which he was staying.

"MY DEAR FRIEND," she wrote, falling naturally into a style of address which she had learned from her German friends, "it is now three weeks since you wrote to me, and I am anxious to hear the result of your efforts. If you are not at Mickleham you will probably have left the address to which this letter must be forwarded. I have news for which you will not be prepared—not with respect to poor Davy's wishes, only concerning my poor self, and therefore, you may think, not worth hearing. But it is wonderful news to me. I am not altogether friendless any longer; I have even had a quiet, peaceful, English home offered to me. My mother's father has found me out, and begs me to make his house my home. To this I shall not consent, though I shall visit him gladly. But what will you say when you learn my grandfather's name? You have heard of him already, as I too had done; perhaps you have even seen him while making your inquiries in Lincolnshire. It is Mr. Hervey of Netherby Manor. My dear mother's name was Mabel Hervey; she left her home against her father's wish to marry a German musician—

Ernst Marlitt. I am sure that you will understand what a delight it is to me to know that I am not quite alone in the world. Will you not write to me soon and assure me of your sympathy?
—Your sincere friend,

“VERA DE LUSIGNAN.”





PART IV.—NETHERBY.

CHAPTER XXIII.

“WITH A GIFT IN HIS HAND.”

M^{RS}. DE LUSIGNAN had by degrees gathered round her a small circle of acquaintances whom she need have disdained to know. Some of her former friends had given her introductions to countrymen of their own in London : her beauty, her beauty, and her stainless reputation, as well as a large-heartedness and benevolence of disposition, which enabled her to do many a kindness to persons less favourably situated than herself, made her popular in other circles. She soon found that she might know almost as many people as she chose ; also (which was more important) she might know the people whom she *wished* to know. But she had little time for general acquaintance ; and it was only on Sunday afternoons

that she devoted herself for a few hours to the task of receiving guests. On Sunday, from four until seven, Vera's little drawing-room was generally well filled.

It was on one of these Sunday afternoons then—a sunny summer afternoon about five o'clock—that Vera, busily engaged in talking to her friends, was startled by the announcement of “Mr. Ravenscroft.” She had not seen Mr. Ravenscroft for full three weeks, nor had she received any letter from him. She knew that he had gone into Lincolnshire not long before the day on which Maurice had also gone thither, and she had been fervently hoping that they would not meet. She had had no word from Maurice since the letter written on his arrival at Mickleham; of his illness, of course, she knew nothing; and she was full of uneasiness at his long silence. He *must* be ill, she thought; some accident must have happened to him, or he would have written. Perhaps Mr. Ravenscroft might tell her something about his movements.

She saw at his entrance that he was ill pleased to find her the central figure of a gathering of friends. It might be flattering, but it was not always pleasant to Vera to mark how much impatience he showed of her intercourse with any-

body but himself. He cast a keenly inquiring glance at the gentleman with whom she happened to be conversing—a theatrical and musical critic and a sayer of smart things; then his eyes roved rapidly round the room with an expression of haughty scrutiny before they returned to Vera's face. There were present some six or seven persons besides Mrs. Cradock and Vera herself—her friend, the critic, Mr. Heron; a rising artist named Wynter; a German professor whom Vera had known abroad; and one or two younger men, remarkable for nothing but their good looks and irreproachable costume. There were two lady visitors, Miss Helen Maxwell, a young pianist and composer, who was often to be found in Vera's company, and a German girl, the daughter of Professor Sturm. There was a slight movement amongst some of the visitors when Ravenscroft's name was heard. Professor Sturm made his way to Vera's side a few moments later and asked in an apologetic tone whether this were not "the Herr Rabenscraft who had so long in the East remained and such perilous journeys in the desert undertaken." Vera instantly offered to introduce him to the great traveller, and did so, in spite of a look of abject entreaty from Gaston's eyes to be spared the infliction. In five minutes

they were deep in conversation about the Kirghiz steppes ; and if Mr. Ravenscroft looked unutterably bored, the professor at least was happy.

"Is that the Oriental traveller?" said Mr. Heron, whose remarks would often have been termed audaciously rude, but for a flavour of geniality and sunshiny good-humour about him, which made one think that he only half believed the cruel things he said. He was a big, fair, burly man, with mocking eyes and a pleasant smile, a man whom many people liked but few entirely trusted. "Is that the traveller, Mademoiselle Vera?" For it was by this form of address that Vera was generally known in private life. "Now be merciful and don't introduce me ; I detest travellers ; I detest the East. From all that I have heard I *think* that I detest Mr. Ravenscroft. I hope he isn't a dear friend of yours, by the by?"

"If he were it would not signify," Vera said. "We are all well aware of your habit of detesting people, Mr. Heron."

Their voices had been lowered ; but Mr. Heron now looked round him with a laugh and appealed to Ernest Wynter, the artist. "Mademoiselle de Lusignan accuses me of detesting people," he said. "Let Mr. Wynter arbitrate ! Is it not much

easier to detest people than to like them? and generally more reasonable too?"

"I do not find it easier," said Vera.

"Nor I more reasonable," said Mr. Wynter, smiling.

"Happy persons. Do you mean to say that when you meet a stranger you have not an immediate instinct of dislike to him? I have a decided prejudice against every one I see for the first time, and every man must show good cause for my liking him before——"

"Before you condescend to honour him with your friendship?" Vera said, not able to refrain from smiling.

"When I meet a stranger," said Mr. Wynter, "I consider him, I fear, professionally. I make a note of him, if he is worth it, for a study—a sketch."

"This is interesting," returned Mr. Heron. "Are we all down in your notes, Wynter? Have you got us one and all? I shall henceforward examine your pictures with an interest they have not previously excited in me—to see whether I recognise my friends."

"Where do you sketch us, Mr. Wynter?" said Helen Maxwell, looking up at him with a smile.

"Do you use your thumb-nail or your cuff, like schoolboys in church?"

"Or young army men when they are going in for examination?" said Mr. Heron, with an oblique glance at one of the youths present.

"I must confess," Mr. Wynter answered, with a modest air, "that I have not, *as yet*, availed myself of these methods. My memory is fairly good; I often retain faces and forms for a considerable time; therefore I find it best to record my impressions every evening—in fact, I keep a sort of draughtsman's diary, in which," he added, with a quaint upward glance at Mr. Heron (for he was a little man), "most of my acquaintances have at various times figured."

"In characteristic attitudes, no doubt."

"Why, yes; but sometimes," said Mr. Wynter adroitly, "it is a little difficult to decide on exactly a characteristic attitude. Miss Maxwell, of course, should be a sort of St. Cecilia; our friend, the Professor, naturally figures as a lecturer, and Mr. Lilywhite over there recites; but as for you, Heron, I can think of no attitude or character for which you are quite appropriate—though I have tried many times—except—pardon me—that of a middle-aged Mephistopheles respectably married, and rather inclining to grow stout."

Mr. Heron was the first to laugh at this

rejoinder ; but declared it to be so unflattering that he must instantly take his departure—he could face his friends no longer. As he shook hands with Vera, he bent forward to make a confidential remark in his usual jocose but friendly manner.

"I am going, Mademoiselle Vera, because I foresee that I shall be drawn into a vortex of Orientalism if I remain. I notice that the traveller has fixed his glittering eye upon me, and marked me for his next prey. Wynter once spent six months in Cairo, and made my life a burden to me in consequence. Do you see how one after the other has succumbed to the fatal attraction? First the Herr Professor; now Mr. Lilywhite and Mr. Nevil; and there is Wynter addressing himself to the task of making your lion roar as softly as any sucking dove!"

"He is claiming acquaintance," said Vera.

"Exactly so. Everybody knows everybody else in the East. I'm glad you haven't been in the East, Mademoiselle de Lusignan; it is a great comfort to talk with somebody who has visited neither India nor Egypt, China nor Japan. No doubt Mr. Ravenscroft met Ernest Wynter in Beloochistan or Siam or somewhere—my knowledge of geography is very limited. I con-

gratulate you on your acquaintance with the lion of the day. The Geographical Society asked him to go and lecture to them the other day, and he refused. Fancy refusing those respectable old gentlemen!"

He departed, laughing as he went, and carried off Mr. Lilywhite. The others shortly afterwards followed his example; Helen Maxwell stayed to play to Vera a *Réverie* which she had just composed, and then retired in company with the Sturms. But Mr. Ravenscroft remained; he had given Vera a significant word and glance once when she was passing. "I have something to tell you," he had said. "May I stay?" She gave him a sign of assent: she had no time for more. But in spite of her outward calm her heart began to throb violently. What had Gaston Ravenscroft come to say? What news had he brought her of Maurice Guyon and of Davy's bequest?

At a hint from Vera, Mrs. Cradock invited Mr. Ravenscroft to dinner, or rather to the nondescript meal at eight o'clock, which went by that name on Sundays. Until this meal was over he showed no disposition to tell Vera the reason of his visit. Indeed, he bantered her a little, both before dinner and afterwards, respect-

ing her numerous friends in an unusually light tone.

"I thought you told me that you had made no English friends!" he said. "I come here and find you queen of an admiring circle. I did not know that you held your court on Sunday afternoons!"

His dark brows were smoother than Vera had often seen them: there was a pleased light in his eyes. It was not till after dinner, when they were alone in the drawing-room, that his face grew moody and his jesting words less frequent.

"You have so many people to admire you," he began gloomily at last, "that you would not, I suppose, be easily persuaded to quit a public life and vegetate in a country village?"

"No, I think not," said Vera.

This answer seemed to irritate him. "You value the smiles of your *brilliant* circle, then, so much," he said, "that it is nothing to you to miss the joys of a home life, of kindred and association? What are you smiling at?"

"I am smiling at such a question from the lips of a man who has lived for ten or twelve years in Central Asia."

"I have not lived all the time in Central

Asia. But what is there in that to make you smile?"

"I was thinking how great your appreciation of the 'joys of a home life, kindred, and association' must have been."

"I am not a woman."

"I am a woman—and an artist too."

He rose and stood before Vera, his deep-set eyes blazing as they looked into hers. "Are you so utterly without feeling, then," he said, "that an artist's life is more to you than that of an ordinary woman?"

Her eyes fell before his. "There is a French proverb, Mr. Ravenscroft," she said, "which holds true in this case as in many others: 'Si l'on n'a pas ce qu'on aime, il faut aimer ce qu'on a.' If I cannot lead the ordinary woman's life, I must content myself with the artist's. But that is putting the matter on too low a level. I love my life as a singer, and I would not readily give it up."

Mr. Ravenscroft turned away and began pacing the floor with slow uneven steps. Presently he paused and looked out of the window: in this position, without turning his head, he spoke.

"I said I had something to tell you, Vera."

"Yes, Mr. Ravenscroft."

"Will you come here and look at the stars while I tell it to you?"

His voice was very gentle. Vera went up to him trembling, she knew not why. He had drawn the curtains aside, and was looking into the garden at the back of the house—a larger and pleasanter garden than is often found in that part of London. The dim shapes of trees and shrubs were hardly distinguishable in the starlit darkness; a soft breath of perfume reached their nostrils from below. Ravenscroft unfolded his arms and took the girl's hand in his.

"I have a gift for you," he said, "for which I am not sure that you will thank me. You have spoken of yourself as friendless and lonely. Friendless in one sense you are not, but you mean that you have no relations living?"

"None of whom I have ever heard."

"Look at the stars, Vera. I want you to be soft and tame and gentle before I say what I have to say. I wish you could see the glory of the heavens as I have seen it; the boldest heart bows beneath its influence. Well, Vera, should you be glad if you could find your own relations?"

Vera could not answer him. A certain dizziness came over her. A vision of possibilities of which she had long ceased to dream suddenly

turned her sick and faint. In another moment she found his arm around her and heard him speaking tenderly.

"Poor little one! so brave and yet so weak! How could you think of standing alone in this rough world, Vera? You have kith and kin, child; you are not so lonely as you thought. I come from your mother's father, who has made me the bearer of a message to you. Look up, Vera. Will you not own that you are a *little* glad?"

Vera drew herself away from him and pushed back her hair. "I may be glad when I have time to think," she said breathlessly, "but now I cannot understand——"

"Ah! it must be difficult to believe at first. I can assure you that relations are not always the most desirable possessions in the world. Well, are you ready to listen? Your grandfather is living; he deeply regrets the long separation between himself and you and your mother, and he begs you to go and see him as soon as possible."

"Where? Who——"

"Who is he? His name, my dear Vera, is Richard Hervey; he lives in Lincolnshire; and—such is the curious coincidence!—he is my

mother's cousin. Consequently, little as you have thought, but as I have long known, you are a relation of mine, fair lady ; second cousin once removed, or something of that sort, I believe."

"It is not possible !" Vera said faintly. " You cannot be in earnest, Mr. Ravenscroft ?"

"In sober earnest, child, and only sorry that I cannot introduce you to a pleasanter set of relatives. You will make friends with Olivia, however ; you and she have a trifling third cousinship between you ; but you have a dragon to face in the shape of my mother, and a sort of learned ogre in the person of Mr. Richard Hervey. Well, are you pleased ?"

"No," said Vera briefly ; and sitting down she hid her face in her hands.

"I hardly thought you would be," he answered, beginning to pace the room in his old impatient fashion. This action presently brought Made-moiselle de Lusignan to herself ; for, seeing his discomfiture, she begged him to come and sit down beside her and explain how these things came to pass.

"They are easily told," he said, accepting the seat she offered him, but without banishing the frown from his face. " Your mother's name was

Mabel Hervey. She ran away from home with a German music-master, and when he died, after your birth, she fell into poverty. Your grandfather refused to forgive her——”

“And yet he expects me to go and see him!”

“He says he had no notion of her real distress, and when she was led into that marriage with Stanger, of which *he* took care to inform old Hervey, he cast her off completely. But afterwards his heart softened—or so he says; you must not expect me to be very respectful towards your grandfather, Vera; all that I can say is that I never saw much trace of its softening—and now he wants you to go to him.” Then Gaston gave in as few words as possible a short account of the way in which he had discovered the fact of Vera’s relationship to Mr. Hervey and his reasons for withholding it from her.

“So you knew all the time?” said Vera in a bewildered way. “You helped me because I was one of your family—not out of pure kindness——”

“Not at all,” said Gaston promptly. “What a Don Quixote I must have appeared to you all these years! Divest your mind of the super-

fluous gratitude with which you seem to have regarded me, my dear child, and learn the true name of your benefactor. It was your grandfather who sent you to school and to Germany; I was only his steward—a very insignificant person. You can judge now why I objected to your letters of thanks."

Vera covered her face with her hands and made no reply.

"I told Hervey," Gaston proceeded coolly, "that he ought to have taken you home to Netherby years ago. I pointed that remark the other day, when he brought himself to inquire about you, by observing that I was particularly struck by the tender feeling that had made him decline to see you so long as you were in need of help, and seek you out as soon as you were successful and admired."

"Oh, Mr. Ravenscroft! you did not say that!"

"Indeed I did, and more. Never mind; he paid me back in my own coin. A bitter tongue has Richard Hervey. Poor child!" he said, suddenly regarding her, "I am not giving you a very pleasant impression of your nearest relation, am I? The notion of your being old Hervey's granddaughter, Vera, always had in it

something inexpressibly droll to me. You are so unlike him, and yet you have some of his traits, as your poor mother had—the delicate features, the fair hair and complexion, the broad, low brows.”

“Do you remember my mother?” Vera said in a stifled voice.

He was silent for a moment.

“Very slightly, Vera,” he said more gently. “I wish—for your sake—that I remembered her better.” Then he sat beside her for some time without speaking.

“Vera,” he said at last, leaning forward so as to see her better in the dim light, and touching her hand with his own, “I have told you this matter roughly, bluntly, not remembering how greatly it must move you. If I could have done it better I would. But by and by, when you have thought over it, will you not forget the roughness and the bluntness, and be glad of the home and the friends that are offered you?”

“I do not know. I have never seen my grandfather.”

“I wonder, then, whether you will be glad to think that there are others related to you beside your grandfather? I am your cousin, Vera. May I be glad of that, if you are not?”

"You—glad?" Vera repeated. Her senses were in a whirl, and she could hardly understand what he meant, until she found that her hand was imprisoned and carried to his lips.

"Yes, glad," he said. "My proud Vera, who scorned my gifts! I am glad that you are of my race and kindred, and that I have some little right to care for you apart from any dearer right that I hope to earn. Some day—surely some day, Vera—you will tell me you too are glad that we have found you and claimed you as our own."

He spoke so tenderly and yet so impetuously that she did not dare to interrupt him. But a great terror fell upon her. *His own?* It seemed to her as though Davy's voice resounded in her ears and bade her once again "beware of Gaston Ravenscroft," as if a dead woman's form rose threateningly between her and the strong man at her side.

"No, no!" she cried, scarcely knowing what she said. "No, I am not glad. I am sorry—and shall be sorry all my life."

She lost control over herself and burst into a passion of tears. Mr. Ravenscroft rose and stood looking down at her, as if suddenly startled and perplexed.

“Child,” he said presently, “you will think differently by and by. I will come again to-morrow. Believe me, Vera, you may still be glad of the news that I have brought.”

He went without waiting for a reply.





CHAPTER XXIV.

HER OWN KITH AND KIN.

PERHAPS he was right. On the morrow Vera had begun to take a certain satisfaction in the knowledge that she had friends—English relations of her own. When Ravenscroft saw her he took her by the hands, looked into her face and smiled.

“How is it with you this morning?” he said. “Have you rested? Do you repent of all the unkind things you said last night? Or do you still repudiate with horror the notion of a relationship between us?”

“I did not repudiate it, Mr. Ravenscroft.”

“Mr. Ravenscroft!” he said, with an odd look. “Am I not to be favoured with my privileges, then? Don’t you know, Vera, that in England cousins call each other by their Christian names?”

"But I am not an Englishwoman."

He drew his lips up as if he were going to whistle, then dropped her hands, and surveyed her from head to foot.

"So that is the line you are going to take, is it? Very well, Mademoiselle Vera. You *will* soon alienate your grandfather's heart, if you express that sentiment so strongly."

"I do not know that I shall express it strongly," Vera said. "I feel it strongly. My father was a German, and I am of his race. I have not been a great deal in England. I love England—yes; but if my grandfather had wanted me to feel as an Englishwoman should, he should have found me and my mother earlier, and saved her from the miserable life she led—and from a broken heart. Do you think I did not know of her unhappiness? Did I not know what sacrifices she made for me? I ought not to say this to you, or perhaps to any one; but *if* Mr. Hervey tells me to forget my father, I shall say it all to him."

"Be reasonable, Vera. Your grandfather *is* an old man. Remember that he had been disappointed—disobeyed: it is hard for a man to forget such treatment from an only child."

"I think you ought not to say that to my

mother's daughter," said Vera, walking away from him.

"Oh yes, you are very proud, Vera: one knows that already. But *you* can confer an obligation now. You can let him have the pleasure of feeling that he can treat you at least as he ought to have treated your mother; that he can love you as he loved her; that through you she forgives him——"

"Does he need that love and forgiveness?" Vera asked. "If he is old and feeble, if he wants me to be a help and comfort to him—yes, then for my mother's sake I will be ready. But I do not know my grandfather. Is he ill or weak, or in need of anything that I can give?"

Mr. Ravenscroft's face changed singularly whilst she was speaking. Impatience, scorn, amusement, flitted across it in turn; and when, after a moment's pause, he answered, it was with a sarcastic laugh and in a harsh and grating voice.

"I know precious little about your grandfather, Vera. He has never been anxious for my acquaintance. You had better go and see him, and then you can judge for yourself."

"He has not written to me."

"He never writes letters. He sends you every kind of gracious message that can be

devised ; and particularly wishes you to understand that if you will come and live with him, you will be the mistress of his house and of course the heiress of his fortune—which is considerable.”

“Does that mean that he wishes me to leave my profession ?”

“Why, yes,” said Mr. Ravenscroft coolly. “Old country gentlemen—even with Hervey’s artistic tastes—do not care about having a grand-daughter singing in public——”

“You ask me to be reasonable,” said Vera, rising to her feet. “This is reasonable indeed ! He casts my mother out of doors, he leaves me to be supported by charity ; and when I have made my own position and have learned to love my art, he says to me—‘Come away : leave the work to which you have been trained for so many years until it is like a second nature to you, until it is as your life, and as the very blood that flows in your veins : leave it and I will give you a comfortable house, a soft bed, good dinners, and, at my death, perhaps a fortune—and then, when you have renounced all that is most dear to you, and buried your powers and your success, I shall feel that I have atoned for the cruelty that let your mother toil and strive and die

without lifting a finger to save her from life that is worse than death.' No, Mr. Ravenscroft: Mr. Hervey's offers have no charm for me. Once and for all, I decline them."

He argued with her; upbraided her for her obstinacy, as he called it; talked himself at last to a very bad humour, and said some things which galled and cut the proud girl to the quick. He was never very careful to spare Vera's feelings; but he overstepped the limits of prudence when at last he accused her of an unwomanly love for independence, of a wish to set the ordinary laws of society at defiance, of a preference for a life where she was not bound to choose her friends from her own station—"but might fraternise with any adventurer or Bohemian who took her fancy——"

"This is too much," she said. "I have no desire to listen to you any further. There is the door: you will oblige me by going out of it, and not returning until you have learned what are the things that you ought not to say to a woman with any self-respect. None of the 'adventurers' or 'Bohemians,' as you choose to designate my friends, would dream of employing towards me such insulting—such grossly insulting—words as Mr. Gaston Ravenscroft has thought fit to use

in speaking to a 'friendless' and 'unprotected' girl."

"Heroics, Vera?" he said with a cold smile. "I should not have expected them from you."

Evidently he did not intend to go. But Vera had rung the bell sharply: Janet appeared at the door to show him out. He had no alternative. He made a low, mocking bow, to which Vera returned a very slight bend of her head, and then departed.

He came next day, but she was angry still, and would not see him. On the Wednesday she had a bad headache, and was again denied to him. In the evening he sent her a magnificent bouquet of hot-house flowers. The season was nearly over: she had one or two concert engagements to fulfil, and then she made up her mind that she would leave town. One thing only held her back from making this decision. She could not go until she had heard from Maurice Guyon.

Another call, another bouquet, and a penitential note, induced Vera at last to receive her offending cousin. He found her engaged in arranging flowers and ferns in a little open basket. At first neither spoke. He stood beside her gloomily, and looked at the exotics in her hand.

"What are you doing this for?" he asked at length.

"I am taking your stiff bouquet to pieces," she answered. "You will see that the flowers look prettier when they are separated. The ferns come from my tiny conservatory. When the basket is full I am going to take it to the Children's Hospital."

"Is that the way you treat my gifts?"

"Am I a child that you have been trying to propitiate me with gifts during the last few days? Here is your bracelet: I found it ingeniously fastened round the stems of the stephanotis. Give it to some one who values gifts made in such a spirit."

"Ah, Vera," he said, looking at her with wonder, "you are not like other women. These pretty toys"—he took the bracelet on the tips of his fingers as he spoke—"are the things for which some women sell their souls."

"I should very much doubt, then," said Vera sharply, "whether they had souls to sell!"

He laughed a little, and his brow cleared. "Do you not forgive me, Vera?" he said.

"If my forgiveness is worth anything, I give it to you," she answered him.

"Wear this bracelet in remembrance of the forgiveness, then."

"Oh, no. No more gifts if you please, Mr. Ravenscroft."

"Then what am I to do with it?" he said in a bad-humoured tone. "I suppose you are aware that it is not very useful to me."

"Take it to Miss Ravenscroft," said Vera, laughing. "And now—I am not inclined to quarrel with you again this morning—can we drive you anywhere? Mrs. Cradock and I are going to take flowers and fruit to our little friends in Great Ormond Street. You have never been into the garden: come and see the mulberries. The fruit trees are all laden this year."

She led the way into the garden, and showed him the lawn and the one great mulberry-tree, the plots of flowers and fruit-bushes, and the sun-flowers standing in a row against the lichen-stained red-brick wall. She did not want him to reopen the subject of her relations with her grandfather, and therefore she talked on every possible subject with much more volubility than was her wont. But once he interrupted her to say with a scrutinising glance,

"You are not looking well, Vera. Are you working too hard?"

"Not at all. My work is almost over. I am going away for a holiday very soon. And then

—I have had two offers : one to go to St. Petersburg, and one to remain in England and sing at a series of concerts during the winter.”

“ Which shall you accept ? ”

“ I do not know. The St. Petersburg offer is the more lucrative, and I should like to see Russia. But I want to stay in England too.”

“ And your holiday—why not spend it at Netherby, and learn to know your relations ? ”

Vera started. The idea was a new one, but not altogether unpleasing. “ I will think over it,” she said slowly. “ I might do that, perhaps.” And then, with more tact than Ravenscroft usually showed, he changed the subject by remarking on the beauty of the geraniums.

He seemed determined not to leave Vera alone that day. He lunched with her and Mrs. Cradock, drove with them into town, insisted upon largely adding to their provision of flowers at a florist’s shop, went with them even to the hospital. Here Vera would gladly have dispensed with his presence, for she had promised to sing to the convalescent children, and she would rather have had no other listeners. But he haunted her footsteps, observing her curiously as she went with her little presents from one bedside to another, listening, looking, now and then asking a question of the

attendants, which showed that he was interested in the sight.

One poor little man, to whom the prettiest flowers and the best toy had been given, because he was in pain, murmured to the nurse,

“I wish the gentleman would come too.”

“What gentleman?” Vera asked.

“It’s a gentleman who has been here a good deal lately,” was the answer. “He sits and talks to the children, and amuses one or other of them for an hour at a time some days. A Mr. Guyon, I believe.”

Vera felt her cheeks flush, and glanced involuntarily at Gaston Ravenscroft, knowing how much he disliked to hear that name; but his face was turned aside.

“Has he not been here lately?” she asked, stooping down to lift a wooden soldier that had fallen to the floor.

“Not for three weeks or a month. I suppose he must be out of London, and Micky is always asking when he is coming back. I was told that he came first with a child who had been run over in his arms; and he has often been since then.”

Vera sang with a light heart that afternoon. Was it not good to hear of kindness and gentleness silently bestowed on little children? There

was one thing, at least, of which Vera, henceforth felt certain—that Maurice Guyon's unexplained absence did not come from any coldness or hardness of heart. The thought of his visits pleased her more than an announcement which she saw a few days later in a newspaper, that "Gaston Ravenscroft, Esquire," had made a handsome donation to this hospital.

For the moment Mr. Ravenscroft's brow was very gloomy. He refused to be driven back again, refused to dine with Vera, and strode away impatiently when he had bidden her farewell. "My dear," said Mrs. Cradock, looking after him with some amaze, "your cousin, Mr. Ravenscroft—how odd it is that you should be his cousin!—is kind-hearted, but he does not possess the blessing of a good temper."

Vera laughed, and agreed with her.

Mr. Ravenscroft's ill-humour lasted, in fact, until Sunday, when, having obtained the general invitation which was all that was necessary for Vera's informal receptions, he made his appearance in the course of the afternoon. The day was remarkably inclement for that time of year: the rain was falling fast, the wind howling. A brisk fire burned in the grate; there were many flowers in the room, which looked bright and cheerful.

Mr. Ravenscroft drew a low chair near the fire, and sank into it with a sigh of relief.

"What a pretty room you have, Vera!" he said. "To come here out of the wind and rain and turmoil outside is to enter a veritable paradise."

"That is high praise from you," said Vera, as she brought him his tea, which he took carelessly from her hand like one accustomed to attention, with scarcely a word of thanks. "How many hours do you expect to minister to you when you get there?"

He looked up, laughing, but a little confused. "I beg your pardon," he said. "I did not notice that *you* were bringing me my cup of nectar. Do you hope to see many of your friends on a day like this?"

"No, one or two have been and gone. You are the last comer."

"I brought you no flowers to-day; I did not dare. What flowers do you like best of all, Vera?"

"Violets, I think."

"Yes, you are as fond of them, I notice, as any Bonapartist. Well, may I bring you violets?"

"Thanks, I have plenty. I would rather not trouble you."

"There are violets in the garden," said Mrs. Cradock, sleepily, from a distant corner, "and in the greenhouse too—Russian violets."

There was a momentary silence. "What were you reading?" said Mr. Ravenscroft with some chilliness of tone. "A French book?"

"A translation only." Vera surrendered the volume to his hand rather apprehensively, and saw his eye sparkle and the veins on his temple begin to throb as she did so. The book was a version of the poems of the Russian author, Poushkin.

"Russian! Russian! always Russian!" said her visitor, turning over the leaves with a scornful air. "Why do you read such trash? How long is this Russian craze going to last?" And then he threw the volume contemptuously to the ground, open, face downwards, with some of the leaves starting out. "Why were you called by a Russian name, too? That is what I have often wanted to know."

"When you have restored to me the poor book that you have treated so badly, perhaps I will tell you," said Vera with indifference which ill masked her resentment.

Instead of answering, he got up, went to the tea-table and presented his cup to Mrs. Cradock

for more tea. He drank it standing, replaced his cup on the table, and came back to the fire-side wiping his long moustache and saying,

"Upon my word! so I am to fetch and carry for you now, Mademoiselle Vera!"

Vera sat motionless and silent, with a mutinous look on her fair face. He smiled, gathered up the scattered leaves, smoothed them and put them into their right places, then restored them to her with a low bow.

"Your serenity would be incomprehensible to me," he said, seating himself beside her with a friendly air, "but that I know whence you derive it. And what about the name?"

"Another time; I had forgotten something that I meant to ask you, Mr. Ravenscroft——"

"Are you *never* going to acknowledge our relationship, mademoiselle?"

"I want to know what led my grandfather to think of me after so many years. You say that he does not read newspapers."

"Oh, your name was casually mentioned to him," said Gaston, in an offhand way.

"By you?"

"No, by a visitor."

"What visitor?"

"How should I know?" said Ravenscroft.

"You do know. Your eyes don't meet mine truthfully. It is not your nature to be deceitful."

"Thank you, Vera, for the compliment. Well, if you particularly wish to hear," he said carelessly, "it was a person with whom you are acquainted—one Gaston Ravenscroft, who has made your name pretty familiar to your grandfather for some years."

"I have to thank you then——"

"Not at all. You never thank me for anything from your heart."

"I do indeed, Gaston," said Vera softly.

It was a difficult matter for her to pronounce the name, but she was repaid for the effort by the undisguised light of pleasure that broke over his dark face when she had said it.

"At last!" he said. "Why, this is an improvement, thank Heaven! I began to think that I should never hear that word from you. I never liked the name so well before."

He stood upright and looked down at her with a wonderful softening of the stern features of his face.

"Are you beginning to relent, Vera?" he said. "Is that remarkable coldness of demeanour going to give place to something a little warmer? I think it is. Come, let me take ad-

vantage of this happy moment ! When will you go down with me to Netherby ? ”

Vera yielded. She promised to write to Mr. Hervey and propose a short visit at the end of the month. He gave her no time for reflection ; he made her write the letter there and then, and took it away with him to post.

In a day or two there was an answer. Mr. Hervey wrote politely, not tenderly, begging Vera to come at her earliest convenience. So she fixed the day for a visit to Netherby Manor.

But on the same day she wrote a note to the address that Maurice Guyon had given her at Mickleham. She felt as if she could not bear his silence any longer.

When she left London for Netherby a few days afterwards, there had been no answer to her letter.

Mr. Ravenscroft travelled north with her, and took pleasure in providing for all her wants. Vera asked him once what had become of Franklyn. He seemed surprised by the question.

“ Franklyn ? ” he said, and paused. “ Oh, he has married and settled somewhere—at a public-house, I think. I should not have thought that you would remember Franklyn,” he added.

“I remember him very well,” Vera answered, thinking of the other strangers to whom she had been introduced on the day of her first journey to Netherby—the Baroness, Mrs. Philip Ravenscroft, Olivia. The remembrance of that evening amongst them had power even then to dye her cheeks scarlet and to make her veil her eyes. Mr. Ravenscroft, who had been watching her closely, divined her thoughts. They were alone in the railway carriage. He leaned over from his seat, and spoke energetically.

“You had better forget those old days, Vera. If you do not recall them, nobody else will.”

Vera looked at him helplessly and said nothing.

“If my mother questions you, say as little as possible about me. If she is insolent or unkind, tell me at once. You will make your own way with Felicia and her daughter. As to your grandfather”—he shrugged his shoulders—“I must leave you to your own devices there. I have neither advice nor assistance to give. Except—there is one thing—don’t make a pet of that young scamp, Lance Aylmer. It would be useless to pretend that you have a very easy part to play; but you are a brave woman, Vera, and a woman with brains, and you are not likely to lose either heart or head because you meet with

difficulties. For my part," he added, drawing back, and looking at her with a critical cool smile, "I am rather curious to see what line you will take. I must confess that at present I have not the faintest idea."





CHAPTER XXV.

MR. HERVEY'S GRANDDAUGHTER.

AT Netherby Station Mr. Hervey's carriage was drawn up in waiting for Mademoiselle de Lusignan, side by side with Madame Waldstein's phaeton for her son. It was Lance Aylmer who came forward to greet Vera, and to tell her that he had been commissioned to escort her to the Manor, and to make Mr. Hervey's excuses to her for not meeting her in person.

Gaston Ravenscroft's brow contracted at this message.

"And he sent *you* instead," he remarked in a curiously dry voice. "Well!" The contemptuous displeasure of his manner was so obvious that Lance's cheek reddened with confusion, and he glanced at Vera in troubled and ingenuous apology.

"I am very sorry," he said, "but Mr. Hervey

wished me to come. I hope that you do not mind ; he was afraid of the heat, and thought that you would excuse him."

"I do not mind at all," she answered, frankly giving him her hand, and wondering whether he were an inmate of her grandfather's house. "I should have been sorry if he had inconvenienced himself at all for me."

And yet her heart sank a little at this sort of reception.

"You are coming with me, are you not?" she asked, seeing that Gaston held back when she was seated in the carriage.

"Hm, no ; I think not."

"Mr. Hervey is expecting you," said Lance, who was still standing in the road. "Madame Waldstein is there, and Mrs. Ravenscroft and Olivia."

Gaston turned his head sharply as if something displeased him in this address ; then seemed to recollect himself, and answered with stiff civility :

"Thank you, I will come."

He took the place beside Vera, and was very silent during the drive. Occasionally his eyes rested with an expression of distaste and dislike upon the boy before him ; but Lancelot seemed

ke no notice of these glances. He was occupied in talking to Vera in an easy, graceful way, which she found peculiarly attractive; there was a pretty, chivalrous deference in it which was charming. The boy's brown eyes and sweet smile were so winning that she marvelled at Mr. Manscroft's hardly-concealed aversion to him. But when they reached Netherby Manor, Vera forgot all about Lancelot in the intensity of her excitement. She sat erect, clasping her hands round her; her heart beat loud and fast; she could scarcely hear the remarks that her companions made.

The door flew open; servants appeared as if by magic on the steps and in the hall. Gaston led her to alight, and gave her his arm as she entered the house. Vera felt that curious sensations were upon her; but the self-possession induced by training came to her aid. Her eyes did not swim, her ears tingled, her heart throbbed, but she was not wont to do in public; yet she stood and moved and spoke with the dignity of necessity.

Mr. Hervey met her in the hall. Gaston led her up to him, and allowed her to take her hand from his arm. She raised her eyes to her grandfather's face, and saw therein something

sufficiently like her mother's to make it easier for her to receive his proffered welcome than she had ever thought that it would be. He kissed her considerably and delicately, first on one cheek and then on the other, and did not speak until this greeting was concluded.

"My dear granddaughter," he said, "I am proud and happy to welcome you to the house which I trust will henceforward be your home."

There was more gallantry than affection in his manner; it was the perfection of courtesy; but there was not the slightest trace of feeling in it. He gave the tips of his fingers to Vera as if he were about to lead her out in a minuet, and said politely:

"Let me conduct you to the drawing-room. There you will find other relatives and friends as anxious as myself to make your acquaintance."

"I shall be glad to see them," Vera said gently. It was the first time that she had opened her lips in his house, and she could see that he paid special attention to her voice when she spoke. They passed through a softly-carpeted corridor into a large room with windows and fireplace at either end; so large a room that the little group of people who received them looked curiously insignificant.

"Allow me to present my granddaughter to you, Baroness," said Mr. Hervey in his most polished tones to a lady in an armchair. "I am sure that you will receive her with affection for her dear mother's sake. My first cousin, Vera, Madame Waldstein; your cousin also—twice removed."

He dropped the girl's arm. Vera made the little half-foreign curtsy to which she had grown accustomed in Germany, but she did not offer her hand. It was the same fairy godmother in a wheeled chair whom she remembered of old; it was the same shrill, imperious little voice that spoke as it had spoken to her years before.

"Do you think I need an introduction to her? I have seen her before, remember. And a queer little thing you were, my dear. Do you still sing the very highly-flavoured songs with which you favoured us when you were ten years old?"

If Mr. Hervey's politeness had silenced Vera, Madame Waldstein's *aigre-doux* question had the effect of restoring to her both her self-possession and her powers of speech.

"Madame," she said, meeting her eyes fearlessly, "if I sing to you again, you shall select my songs."

The old lady seemed amused. "It is well not

to be over-confident of one's own taste, certainly," she said, looking the girl all over with her pitiless bright eyes, "and as long as any doubt remains, my dear, you do quite right to be prudent."

"Pardon me, madame, if I say that in such a matter, and under your discerning eyes, mere prudence would avail me very little."

Madame Waldstein raised her eyebrows, half turned round and nodded significantly towards Mr. Hervey.

"She has got the family tongue, this girl!" she ejaculated. "She bears that resemblance, at least, to her grandfather, Richard."

"She bears several others," said a fresh clear voice; and then Olivia came up and took Vera by the hand. "Can you not see how much she is like Cousin Richard, grandmamma?—I beg your pardon for talking about you in this way," she said with a frank and friendly smile. "You do not remember me, though I have seen you once; I am your Cousin Olivia."

"I remember you very well," said Vera, feeling glad to see a friendly face. Olivia drew her forward towards the other ladies in the room. "This is mamma," she said, "and my great friend Countess Zaranoff."

Mrs. Ravenscroft kissed her newly-found

relation kindly, but with a certain reserve of manner. The Countess Zaranoff greeted her with a cordiality that seemed effusive in contrast with Felicia's coolness. It was noticeable that Olivia assumed the lead on this occasion with a tranquillity that showed that she was accustomed to reign over the household.

Vera was placed in a large low armchair, and drank tea, in a conveniently central position, while her relations looked at her a good deal, rather furtively, and talked to her a little, in a somewhat constrained and uncomfortable way. Mr. Hervey treated her with marked distinction, as if she were an honoured guest. Madame Waldstein put up her eye-glasses and surveyed her keenly from time to time as she conversed with Gaston, who stood behind her chair and behaved as though he had never seen Mademoiselle de Lusignan in his life before. Mrs. Ravenscroft was silent, gentle, observant. None of these four gave Vera much help in what she felt to be an exceedingly difficult position.

Presently, however, Olivia asked Mr. Hervey if she might take Vera to her room, and then Madame Waldstein remarked that she ought to be going home.

"So I will say good-bye to you for the present,

Richard," she said. "I have done my duty now, I think. Good-bye, my dear," she added, holding out her hand to Vera. "You may come to see me to-morrow. Yes, Olivia is right, you are very like your grandfather—and your mother too; but I suppose you inherited your black brows from your father? Don't you know, Richard, that it is said that persons with hair and eyebrows differing in colour are never to be trusted?—You are very nicely dressed, my dear; quietly too, that is one comfort——"

"Your compliments are difficult of appreciation, madame; they are caviare to the general," said Mr. Hervey coldly. "Vera has evidently inherited taste from me, if nothing else."

His eyes rested approvingly on her dress as he spoke. It was as simple and quiet as gray and black could be; but she had taken care that the texture should be fine, and the cut as perfect as an English dressmaker could make it; also that all smaller details of her costume should be absolutely irreproachable. Vera was always careful about her dress; she had bestowed fastidious pains on the choice and arrangement of the one in which she was first to meet her grandfather. Her choice seemed to have met with a kind of success.

"I think that you and grandmamma are both very rude," said Olivia boldly. "Who likes to be discussed to one's face?—or even to be complimented! I shall take my cousin away to her own room."

"Wait a minute," said Madame Waldstein, still holding Vera by the hand and examining her face with her brilliant dark eyes—so like those of her son, which were also bent upon the stranger in a keen unsmiling gaze; "how long are you going to stay at Netherby Manor, my dear?"

"I have not yet been able to decide that question, madame."

"For ever, I hope," said her grandfather, not unkindly. "For as long as she chooses, at any rate."

"She won't stay," said the Baroness dryly. "She has too much spirit for that, Richard. You may kiss me, child. I am your relation, after all, and I don't think you are very unlike myself."

Vera gravely kissed the delicate old cheek presented to her, and then retired with Olivia, who darted the sauciest of glances at her grandmother and at Lancelot as she left the room.

She linked her arm in Vera's as they went

upstairs together, and spoke to her with the careless outspokenness which was one of her characteristics.

"The ordeal is over," she said. "You will not find grandmamma so terrible at a second interview, Cousin Vera. I assure you that I tried to rebel; I said that it was positively inhuman to make you face us all in a crowd; but I had nobody on my side at all except Lance. Even dear mamma could not see that there was anything alarming in the solemn reception of our newly-found relation. She called it 'a welcome!'"

"I will accept it in that spirit," Vera said with a smile.

"And allow me to tell you that you won grandmamma's heart—I could see that you did—by not being afraid of her. I expect you to supersede me in her affections altogether, because, although I am never afraid of her myself, I often have to look as if I were, in order to please my mother, who cannot bear madame to be thwarted. I place you on a family footing at once, you see, by instructing you in the family politics. Here is your room."

It was a very pretty room, with a view from the window of the village and church. There

was also a sitting-room opening out of the bedroom, and a tiny dressing-room on another side. The luggage had been unstrapped, and a maid was in waiting to unpack the boxes, but Vera declined her offices, rather to Olivia's wonder, and took off her bonnet and cloak without assistance.

"Can I do anything for you?" said Miss Ravenscroft, who was standing with her hands behind her in an attitude which possessed a somewhat boyish grace. "Can I not help you?"

She looked so pretty, so frank, so confident, at that moment, that an impulse of admiration and affection overpowered Vera's gravity and reserve. She turned and laid her hands upon her cousin's arm.

"You have helped me already. Help me again," she said. "I want somebody to love; let me love you."

Olivia threw her arms round Vera's neck and kissed her.

"I love you already," she said decidedly. "You will be a sister to me, will you not? I have wanted a sister all my life."

The alliance thus made proved a useful one to Vera. Olivia told her cousin as much as she could recollect concerning the arrangements of

the house, the different members of the family, the neighbours who might be expected to call. She gave some shrewd hints respecting Mr. Hervey's tastes and habits, and finally helped to select the dress that Vera was to wear that evening.

"Mamma and I are going to dine here," she said. "Ilma Zaranoff and Uncle Gaston will stay with grandmamma." Then, catching a look of surprise, perhaps of disappointment, on Vera's face, she added quickly and lightly, "You need not expect to see Uncle Gaston here very often. He and cousin Richard don't agree very well. The fact is, Vera dear, your arrival has been the signal for a general family reconciliation; to-day is the first time that grandmamma has entered this house for years, and hitherto Uncle Gaston has been only on business. Mamma does not approve of family feuds, so she has always made a point of calling regularly; and I—well, I come now and then to amuse Lance."

"And who is Lance?"

"A ward of Mr. Hervey's; the son of somebody who is always vaguely alluded to as 'Aylmer of the Guards,' you know," said Olivia, with a touch of mimicry in her tone. "A dear boy—not at all like other boys of his age——" and there she stopped short and blushed.;

"A boy!" said Vera. "I suppose that he is older than you?"

"Oh no,"—a little consciously,—“he is some months younger; and a girl is much older than a boy at that age, don't you think so? At least, so people say.”

She turned her back to Vera, and looked at herself in the mirror, with a pretence of arranging the rebellious little curls upon her forehead. "I think that I look older," she said, assuming a critical air. "I look twenty at the very least."

"Eighteen," said Vera.

"Do you think so—really?" Then she turned round and caught her cousin smiling. "I am very silly, am I not?" she said penitently. "Mamma often tells me so; and madame la grand'mère says that I shall come to a bad end—what end can that be, I wonder? unless it is breaking one's neck over a bad fence on a hunting-day. Did you ever ride to hounds, Vera?"

"Never. I cannot ride."

"Really? You don't mean it? You would look so well in a habit, too. Have you never ridden at all?"

"I think that the only time that I was ever on a horse's back was the day when Mr. Ravens-

croft took me away from Madame Waldstein's house before him on Black Auster's back."

Olivia eyed her cousin curiously for a moment. "You say that quietly, Vera," she remarked, "but you say it bitterly too. Ah yes, if *my* mother had not been carried away by her anxiety for me, you would have found your place in *this* house long ago. If you had stayed with *us*, your grandfather would have grown fond of *you* when he returned from France. He had started a week or two before. As it was, we drove *you* away, when you came to our doors, and helped to prejudice him against you. It was very hard on you, and I have often told mamma so."

"Dear Olivia," Vera said, feeling her eyes grow dim, "Mrs. Ravenscroft was perfectly justified. You don't know what a neglected, untrained little creature I was. She was very kind to me. Do you know that I still have the coral necklace she gave me? I have often worn it and thought of you—the fairy-girl, I used to call you to myself."

"You darling!" Olivia exclaimed quickly; "I don't believe that you ever *would* do anything that was not sweet and good! Oh, Uncle Gaston has talked to me about you! If I were not very magnanimous I should be madly jealous of you

by this time! But mamma was to blame; and she thinks so now. I must admit"—with a little shrug of her shoulders—"that her conversion is mainly due to my arguments."

"What does Mr. Ravenscroft say about me?"

"What does he not say? Of course, you sing divinely, we know that; and you are very much liked and esteemed by your numerous acquaintances: all that goes without saying, does it not? But Uncle Gaston adds (in confidence to me, you understand) that if anybody beside Evelyn Hope was ever made of 'spirit, fire, and dew,' you are 'that great, that inexpressive she.' I supplied him with the exact words of the quotation, but he had implied as much beforehand."

Vera shook her head. Olivia looked at her and laughed.

"I see that you are incredulous. You know Uncle Gaston's curt and fiery style. I asked him once what you were like. He answered, 'The loveliest woman I ever saw.' (Don't blush, Vera.) 'Yes,' I said; 'but what is her character?' 'Saint Cecilia and Don Quixote,' he answered, 'with a touch of Queen Titania into the bargain!' And he maintained that he really could not improve upon that description."

"A description that shows what I have long believed—that he has not the slightest insight into my nature," Vera answered with some indignation.

"Ah, never mind," said Olivia teasingly; "he admires if he does not understand."

"But I would rather that he understood," murmured Mademoiselle de Lusignan.

Vera dressed herself in white, according to Olivia's bidding,—*she* was arrayed in yellow, which became her exceedingly; and together they descended to the drawing-room. The dinner passed off quietly. Mr. Hervey gave his arm to Vera when they went into the dining-room, remarking quietly that on this first night she was a guest, but that later she should assume her rightful position. Vera began to see that she would have to endure much opposition and inflict some disappointment when she made it clear that she did not intend to renounce her own profession.

"Will you sing to us, Vera?" Olivia said after dinner, as they stood by one of the open windows of the drawing-room, inhaling the sweetness of the summer air.

Vera liked the unconcerned frankness of her request better than Mrs. Ravenscroft's low inter-

position—"Perhaps Vera would rather not sing, Olivia;" kindly as she knew that it was meant.

"I should like to sing to you very much," she answered, "if you—if my grandfather—would like it."

"Certainly," said Mr. Hervey, stretching himself luxuriously in an easy-chair, and closing his white eyelids with a look of bland enjoyment. "There is nothing that I like better than good singing. I heard a great deal of music at one time. Open the piano, Lance, for your—for Vera."

He corrected himself with unusual haste, and opened his eyes to survey the others with a keen look, as if he defied them to think that there was anything laughable in his slip of the tongue. Vera went to the piano, preferring to accompany herself, although Mrs. Ravenscroft was a very good accompanist.

She sang in rather a low voice, such as she thought would suit the capacities of the room and the delicate sensibilities of Mr. Hervey; and she sang a little German song of which she was particularly fond; then an *Ave Maria* by Gordiniani, and then a setting of two of William Blake's "Songs of Infancy," arranged by Helen Maxwell, and never published. And then she

paused, and, wondering if she should sing *again*, glanced at her hearers.

Mrs. Ravenscroft had dropped her work upon her lap, and was listening with a dreamy look in her pathetic brown eyes, which at that moment told more of the hidden sadness and blankness in her life than perhaps she would have cared to put into words. Olivia's bright face was ablaze with vivid interest and enjoyment. Lance had drawn close to the piano, and stood listening intently with his head upon his hand. Never had a singer a more appreciative audience.

But Vera's grandfather? His face was in shadow, for the wax candles on the piano only were lighted, and the rest of the room was dark. He spoke presently, in his usual suave and courteous way.

"We are greatly obliged to you, my dear. Your singing is a real enjoyment to the hearers. Your voice, though more trained than that of—of any other member of our family, has in it still some tones—with which—I seem to be familiar." He waited for a moment and continued with a little uncertainty of voice: "Possibly you do not sing old English or Scotch songs? I myself value them only on the score

of their national character—there is something quaint in them—something melodious, though unscientific——”

“Vera has been out of England so long that perhaps she has not had the opportunity of learning those simple airs,” said Mrs. Ravenscroft gently.

“I am very fond of them. I know some of our English ballads,” said Vera.

“There is a volume at your side,” Mr. Hervey returned, speaking rather hurriedly, “where you will find the more attractive melodies. There is one which I have often wished to hear—although perhaps it is not so old as some of them: do you know it? ‘The Queen’s Maries?’”

“I know it well.”

Vera did not need the music-book; she sat down and played the air of which he spoke, and, for the first time, threw all the force and fervour of which she was capable into words which can scarcely be read even in cold blood without a tear. Clearly and wildly rang out the plaintive lines:

“Yestreen the Queen had four Maries,
To-morrow she’ll hae but three:
There was Mary Seaton and Mary Beaton,
And Mary Carmichael an’ me.”

At the end there was a pause. Then Mr. Hervey rose very quietly and went out of the room without a word. Had Vera found a soft place in his heart after all? For "The Queen's Maries" had been her mother's favourite song.





CHAPTER XXVI.

GASTON'S DEFEAT.

VERA had been three days in her grandfather's house ; she had been called upon already by half a dozen families, all eager to report upon the appearance of Mr. Harvey's granddaughter. And on the fourth day after her arrival, she sat in Madame Waldstein's drawing-room, drinking tea, and answering to the best of her ability the searching and cynical questions with which the Baroness occasionally favoured her. The Hall was a cheerful place, the resort of many persons. Some came out of their liking for the Baroness' society (she could be both witty and charming when she chose) ; some out of friendship for Felicia Ravenscroft, who was beloved and rather pitied in the neighbourhood ; some out of admiration for Olivia's fine eyes. Gaston was courted and flattered ; but he seldom responded to the

overtures made to him, although, when he chose, he could smooth his brow, soften his speech, and show that he was the true descendant of a race that had been renowned for its hospitality and its courtliness in days of old.

Vera had sung for Madame Waldstein, who graciously deigned to say that she approved of her voice and style. "It is rather a pity, surely, that you should leave the stage," she said, looking at the singer with her bright eyes and mocking smile. "You are probably very fond of it?"

"Yes, I am fond of it."

"I knew a singer once—a Danish girl," pursued the old lady, "who married a Count—what was his name, by the by?—and became an Ambassadress. His family would not receive her at first, but after a time they treated her very civilly. She was exceptionally fortunate, of course."

"Why?" said Mr. Ravenscroft, who had joined the party as she spoke. "Because she married into a family which—after a time—treated her civilly? Should you have called her fortunate, Vera?"

Vera smiled, but did not answer. The Baroness put up her eye-glass and dexterously shifted the subject.

"Child, is all that hair your own?"

"It is, madame."

"It is uncommon hair; and your eyes are very good too. But you are not half the beauty that your mother was. She had blue eyes and a bright complexion. Don't you think so, Gaston? You must remember Mabel."

"I prefer Vera's style," he answered, giving Vera a cool appraising look, which annoyed her even more than the Baroness' words. She rose on the pretext of replacing her cup on the table; but he was beforehand with her and took it from her hand. At this moment, however, a diversion was effected. A gentleman was announced and admitted—Mr. Frank Longmore. Gaston raised his eyebrows and glanced at Vera as if he thought that the visitor had come to see her; but he was wrong. Mr. Longmore's start of astonishment when he saw *Mademoiselle de Lusignan* was unmistakable. He coloured and looked thoroughly embarrassed for a minute or two; then forced his eye-glass violently into his eye and began to talk to Olivia. Once or twice, however, Gaston detected the straying of his eye towards Vera with an expression of uneasy watchfulness which verged upon anxiety.

Olivia, Lance, and two of their friends went

out to play tennis; Mr. Longmore seemed inclined to attach himself to Vera's side. They conversed a little on the topics of the day, and walked at last to that side of the garden bordered by the plantation. He cast so quick and curious a look at it that Vera offered to show him the view of the church from an opening in the trees on the bank.

There they stood silent for a moment or two. He was pulling at his moustache in the same strangely puzzled manner that Gaston had previously noticed, and when he spoke it was with a good deal of hesitation.

"You would perhaps be surprised," he said, "if I told you that I came here this afternoon chiefly in order to get news of you."

"Of me, Mr. Longmore?"

"Yes, of you, Miss Marlitt." He used Vera's name with some hesitation. "I did not know, I had not the faintest idea, that you were staying at Ravenscroft Hall. But I thought that I should hear from your relations whether you were in London or not."

Vera looked so much astonished that he added a sort of apology. "I must seem very impertinent, and I know that I am blurting out my mission most abruptly, but my excuse must be

that I am not acting on my own account but for a friend of mine : the dearest friend I have in the world too—Maurice . . . Maurice Guyon.”

“Where is he ?” said Vera hurriedly. Her heart leaped like a wild thing at the sound of a name that she had longed for weeks to hear. “Is he here with you ?”

“He is in Mickleham,” said Mr. Longmore, quite at ease, apparently, now that the ice was broken. “Let me ask you, first of all, however, kindly to keep the fact of his presence there a secret to your friends in this house just now. I am sorry that I cannot explain why.”

“Oh, I understand,” Vera said, recalling the object of Maurice Guyon’s visit, and wondering why her ready assent brought another shade of perplexity to her companion’s brow. “I shall certainly say nothing about him here. But will you tell me why—how it was that he——”

“That he has been silent so long ? That is what he wishes to explain. He read your letter yesterday only, and it immediately occurred to him that you might be in this neighbourhood, and that I ought to ascertain that fact before he wrote to your address in London.”

“But why did he not read my letter sooner ?” Vera asked, with impatience which she could not

restrain. The answer was curt and significant enough.

"He was too ill to read it before."

"Ill—he has been ill?"

"He has been dangerously ill—almost dying—of fever."

It seemed to Vera as if the words sent a sharp thrust of pain through her heart. For the moment her voice failed her. Then she called herself to order. Why should she feel so deep an interest in a man whom, six months before, she had never seen? She felt that her hands were trembling and that her face was growing cold. But she commanded herself sufficiently to say, with tolerable firmness, "I hope that he is better"—although in her own ears her voice sounded unnaturally harsh.

"Oh yes," said Mr. Longmore briskly, "considerably better. I came down to nurse him, you know, and I hope that he will be soon strong enough to do what I want him to do—leave England altogether."

"Leave England?" she repeated blankly.

"It would be best for him. But of course he is not yet able even to leave the 'Dragon,' where he is staying."

"When can I see him?"

Mr. Longmore looked at her. "I suppose that when he is better, he will call upon you, if you will permit him to do so, Miss Marlitt."

His eyes were observant and keen. Vera flushed hotly beneath their gaze as she replied :

"No ; he cannot do that—at least until I return to London. I am not in my own house now. Will you ask him, Mr. Longmore, to write me an account of—of—the business upon which he was engaged for me ?"

"Certainly. You are visiting Madame Waldstein ?"

"No ; I am with my grandfather, Mr. Hervey."

And there the interview ended.

But early next morning there came for Vera a little note, written in a hand which she had seen only once before. She tore it hastily open and read. It was written in French, and ran as follows :

"*MADemoiselle*—I have tried to do your bidding and have only partially succeeded. What I have learned cannot be told in a letter. When I am stronger, and when you return to London, I will tell you all. I congratulate you upon your happy fortune with all my heart.—Your humble and devoted servant,

"*MAURICE GUYON.*"

The writing was unsteady, and, towards the end, almost illegible; the traces of weakness and fatigue were visible in every word. Vera's heart swelled with pity. She took a sudden resolution and shut her eyes to its possible consequences.

Mr. Hervey breakfasted alone. She did not therefore disturb him until noon, when she knew that he would have established himself in his study, in the midst of his books in sumptuous bindings and draperies of ecclesiastical character. He looked somewhat surprised by her entrance, and greeted her frigidly, though with great courtesy. For the glimmering of tenderness which he had shown upon the night of her arrival had vanished, and left him, to Vera's thinking, even less lovable than he seemed at first.

"Can I do anything for you, Vera?" he inquired, with his finger between the leaves of his last new quarterly, and his eyes fixed somewhat coldly upon her face. "My time is quite at your disposal, but——"

"I have a petition to make," said Vera hastily. "I hear that a friend of mine is staying at an inn in Mickleham, and that he has been seriously ill—almost at the point of death. I should like to call and ask after him: indeed, I

want to see him, if possible, as I have business to transact with him when he is able to attend to it."

"Is he an intimate friend of yours—this gentleman?" said Mr. Hervey, lifting his eyebrows.

"I have not known him long. We have business together—but I know him very well, I think," she answered with careful honesty.

"Business. Oh—what is he then? A singer—actor—something of that sort?"

"A musician."

"Where is he staying?"

"At the 'Dragon.'"

"A poor little place," said Mr. Hervey meditatively. "A poor man, I suppose. Well, my dear Vera, I am sure that I can trust your discretion. You would no doubt like to take this man some fruit or flowers from the houses, would you not? Let Lance drive you down in the pony-carriage—or take the victoria, if you like. Don't distress yourself another time about my permission, dear Vera. The house is yours; the garden is yours; all that I have is yours, as a Spaniard would say. Give your own orders; consult your own convenience; manage your own business, whilst I, a recluse, sit apart from the world and the world's affairs."

He smiled and bent his head as if to intimate

that the interview had come to an end; and Vera left him very willingly, feeling sure that his only anxiety had been to get her out of the room as soon as possible. She went at once in search of Lancelot, whom she found in the garden, having just returned from his morning's work with a tutor at Mickleham.

"Where do you think that Mr. Frank Longmore is staying?" he said, before she reached his side.

"At the 'Dragon Inn.'"

"Oh, you knew? Such an odd place for him to stay at! I spoke to him at the door this morning; he told me that those were his headquarters."

"Yes," Vera said, "he is nursing a sick friend. And Lance,"—she placed her hand caressingly on his arm as she spoke, "I want you to drive me there this afternoon. My grandfather says I may take some flowers and fruit to this friend who has been so very ill."

"Oh, certainly. But who is the friend? Some one Uncle Richard knows?"

"I know him. He is a friend of mine."

"I see. But, Vera,"—twisting himself round so as to look at her, while the colour in his face deepened, "would it not be better if you sent

the things by a servant? or had I not better go alone?"

"No," she said, "because, Lance, I wish to see him—to speak to him. He has had business of mine to transact, and I must hear this report of it."

"Does Uncle Richard know that?"

"I think so. I meant to tell him so, but I am not sure whether he understood. But he gives me complete freedom to do as I please."

"I'm not at all sure, Vera (though I beg your pardon for saying so), whether you ought to go," said Lance, with his winning grace of manner, "unless your visit is absolutely necessary."

"It is absolutely necessary—for my comfort. Oh, Lance, do help me; I want to go so much."

"Of course I'll help you," said he, throwing conventionality to the wind at once. "We'll go together, and take grapes and peaches. Come away to the houses; we'll make old Foster cut them."

They went in the direction indicated, and teased old Foster into cutting his best fruit for them; then the two lunched with Mr. Hervey, subduing their high spirits as best they could. Lance ordered the pony-carriage for four o'clock,

and in the meantime they chattered, sang, picked flowers, like two happy children. At half-past three, or a trifle later, to Vera's dismay, Gaston Ravenscroft was announced.

He held a short colloquy with Mr. Hervey, then came out into the hall where Lance and she were busy packing a basket with flowers and fruit. He glanced at Vera's occupation, and smiled. "You were arranging flowers for a hospital when last I saw you do this," he said.

"These are for the same purpose," said Lance. "For the sick." And he cast a wicked mischievous look at Vera.

"What is the matter?" said Mr. Ravenscroft suddenly. "Your face is very much flushed, Vera; your eyes are much too bright. What are you so excited about?"

"I am not at all excited; I am warm."

"What have you been doing?"

"Gathering flowers chiefly. Will you have a rose, Mr. Ravenscroft? I will pin it into your coat."

She saw his eye soften at the unusual attention.

She arranged the flower, while he stood silent and apparently unresponsive.

"Am I to have no thanks?" she said at last.

"No," he answered. "Not while you call me what you did just now."

"Vera's lips do not easily accustom themselves to Christian names," said Lance. Gaston threw a stormy glance at him, but made no remark. Vera hastened to smooth matters to the best of her ability.

"I really forgot; I did not omit your Christian name on purpose. Do you hear, Gaston?" she said, looking up at him.

Lance had moved away; Gaston Ravenscroft caught the girl's fingers in his and carried them impulsively to his lips.

"If that meddling lad were out of the way," he said, "I would have——"

But what he would have had, Vera did not hear. Lance had accidentally thrown down a heavy flower-pot, and both turned involuntarily towards the scene of the accident. Gaston uttered an exclamation of disgust at the boy's clumsiness. Vera fancied, from the flush upon Lance's cheek and the hurt look in his eyes, that he had heard both exclamation and previous remark.

The pony-carriage had driven up to the door. Lance said nothing, but placed the flower-basket in its place, then went round to the ponies, and

patted their necks, with his back to the others. The hurt look did not leave his face.

Vera turned rather coldly from Mr. Ravenscroft.

"Good-bye," she said, but she did not hold out her hand.

He helped her carefully into the carriage, inspected the harness, found a buckle loose, and said a sharp word to the groom, without taking the least notice of Lance, who still stood at the ponies' heads. The groom went off to the stables for something needed, and Mr. Ravenscroft asked another question.

"Where does your sick man live?"

"In Mickleham."

"Mickleham. Who is ill at Mickleham?"

"My grandfather knows where I am going, Mr. Ravenscroft," said Vera clearly, with a look of remarkable decision upon her face.

"Does your grandfather know how much small-pox is prevalent in Mickleham, that he allows you to drive about the place so unconcernedly?"

"Lance goes to Mickleham every day. He can take care of me."

Mr. Ravenscroft glanced at Lance with mingled contempt and anger. "An efficient protector," he said sarcastically.

"Quite efficient for this purpose, sir," said Lance with spirit.

"So Miss Marlitt seems to think," returned Gaston icily. He never used Vera's English surname unless he were angry about something. "Be kind enough at least to say in which direction you are going, so that I may tell you what streets to avoid."

"We are going to the 'Dragon.'"

"And I think I know which streets should be avoided," said Lance, who was crimson by this time, yet evidently anxious to keep his temper.

"To the 'Dragon'!" repeated Mr. Ravenscroft very slowly, fixing his eagle eyes upon Vera and Lance in turn. "And what in the name of wonder takes my cousin to the 'Dragon'?"

"Your cousinship gives you no right to question me in this way," Vera answered, flashing out in ire, which nobody could awaken in her so readily as Gaston Ravenscroft. "Get in, Lance, please; we shall be late. Open the gates, James."

Lance was at her side, and James opening the gates before the words were well out of the girl's mouth. They drove off, leaving Gaston to pocket the affront as best he might. He

stood with bent brows and folded arms, watching their exit in no tranquil spirit. As they turned out of the drive, Vera looked over her shoulder, and saw him walking slowly back into the house.

Certainly they had defeated him ; but Vera almost trembled at the victory ; he was not a man, she knew, tamely to accept defeat in any matter on which he had set his heart.





CHAPTER XXVII.

A DRIVE HOME.

AT the "Dragon" Vera asked for Mr. Longmore. He came at once, looking a good deal surprised at her appearance, and said that his friend had been able to move that day into a sitting-room, where he was then lying on a sofa. "In that case," Vera said, "I should very much like to see him for a few moments."

"Oh, certainly," answered Mr. Longmore, with a vague air of not understanding what she wanted. "I'll tell him so. He will be pleased, I am sure."

As he went away to announce her arrival, Vera turned to Lance.

"Don't wait at the door," she said. "Drive anywhere you like for—for half an hour: then come back for me, and if you do not find me waiting, go to Garrow's, the draper's shop. I want to make some purchases, and you can wait for me there."

“Vera,” said Lance, “don’t you think that you are doing rather an unusual thing?”

“Yes. But I am in unusual circumstances.”

“Mr. Ravenscroft——”

“Oh, Lance, don’t talk about it. You know nothing: you cannot tell. It is for Gaston that I do it rather than for myself.”

Vera spoke truly. The more she saw of her cousin, the more anxious she was to clear away the cloud of secrecy and mystery that in some manner darkened his past life; and she could do nothing until she had learned the result of Maurice Guyon’s mission. She had seen Lucy’s grave, and prayed and wept beside it: was she to be kept from fulfilling Davy’s dying wishes by a trifling obstacle of conventionality?

She was used to hiding her feelings behind the decent veil of circumspect reserve; but the feelings thus hidden were passionate and impetuous enough. Nothing in the world would, at that moment, have shaken her resolve to see Maurice Guyon. It was the one thing on which she had set her heart.

Lance yielded to Vera’s wishes. Mr. Longmore returned with the intimation that his friend could see Mademoiselle de Lusignan. The carriage drove away, and she followed her guide

upstairs. He ushered her into a small parlour, where she saw the worn and wasted lineaments of a face which had looked brightly enough upon her when she beheld it last. Even now the blue eyes smiled, and the sunken features were irradiated by a flush of pleasure; but the change that had passed over them was so remarkable that Vera's throat ached with an emotion which she dared not allow to be visible.

He had been lying upon a sofa, covered with a cloak, but when she entered he tried to rise.

"Do not move, pray do not move," she said hastily. "I am so sorry to see that you have been ill."

She gave him her hand, and did not notice until afterwards that he detained it, and laid his left hand upon it for a moment, as he replied,

"You are too good, mademoiselle. I can never be sufficiently grateful to you for your kindness."

Then he relinquished her hand and sank back upon the couch. The transparency of his features made his hollow blue eyes look almost ghastly. The veins stood out upon his temples, and on his long white hands; yet he smiled with a trustful pleased content that showed how little he was disposed to pity himself. But a

glance only was sufficient to show how near he had been to the dreadful "grave and gate of death."

Mr. Longmore brought Vera a chair. She found it difficult to speak, and Maurice seemed eager to spare her the necessity.

"Your visit is not meant as a personal honour, I know," he resumed with a quiet smile. "We have much business to transact, have we not, mademoiselle? But your flowers and your fruit are tokens indeed of kindness."

"I am afraid that my visit is ill timed," said Vera with some compunction. "You do not look able to transact business yet."

"Yes, indeed, I am strong enough for anything. Frank, can't we give Mademoiselle de Lusignan some tea?"

"It is here," said Mr. Longmore, but without any great alacrity. "May I——"

"No, thank you : nothing," she cried earnestly. "I cannot stay. I came only to ask how Mr. Guyon was, and to hear if—if he had any news for me of——"

"But do try my tea, mademoiselle," said Maurice in his persuasive tones. "It is made in Russian fashion with a slice of lemon instead of cream. My friend Mr. Longmore gives it

me under protest, but I think that you will like it."

"Don't you prefer cream, Miss Marlitt?" said Mr. Longmore, as he prepared the cup for the visitor after Maurice's fashion. "I think this way atrocious, but Maurice likes it."

"Yet let me tell you, mademoiselle," said Maurice, "that my friend took the trouble of writing to London for some rare Russian tea and a genuine samovar, that I might drink my national beverage in my national way."

Vera drank her tea, and then Mr. Longmore quietly brought to his friend a small sealed packet, and as quietly turned to leave the room. "You will want to talk business now, I suppose," he said in a lazy manner. "I'll come back presently. You won't let him knock himself up, will you, Miss Marlitt?"

Maurice Guyon wasted no time as soon as the two found themselves alone. He opened the packet, and placed before Vera a locket, containing the miniature of a beautiful woman with pathetic brown eyes, which seemed to her strangely familiar. "That," he said, "was Lucy."

There was another likeness; the portrait of a young, handsome reckless face—a man's face,

with wild, brilliant eyes and a significant look of pride and daring on the well-marked features. It was the very representation of her cousin, Gaston Ravenscroft, as she had seen him first upon the Elmstone Downs.

Then Maurice put the papers in her hands, and told her all that he had ascertained and all that he had guessed. Gaston's marriage, the birth of a child, the flight of Lucy and her boy, Lucy's death and the boy's disappearance, these were the facts of which at least they could be sure.

"I cannot help thinking," Vera said at last, "that the poor child is dead."

"I think not, mademoiselle. And now what shall we do?"

"Now," said Vera, "we will tell Mr. Ravenscroft everything."

He looked at her earnestly, doubtfully. "Mademoiselle," he said, "let *me* do that."

"Certainly not, Mr. Guyon. Forgive me, but I cannot let you take all that trouble. Besides, in some ways it would be easier for him to listen to me than to a perfect stranger."

Maurice sighed. "I suppose so," he said in rather a distressed tone. "But I am sorry that you should have so unpleasant a task imposed upon you."

"I shall be glad for him to know the truth," returned Vera.

"And if you want further help, mademoiselle, you will remember that I shall be only too glad to give it."

"I will remember, Mr. Guyon. But you must not exert yourself. Do not risk your health. It will be some time yet before you are strong."

"Not very long, I hope. But when I am well my friends counsel me not to stay in London." He hesitated a little and looked down. "They tell me to go to America."

Again Vera felt that sensation of darting pain. "It is a long way off," she said in a low tone. "You would not be able to help me if you were there."

"Ah, mademoiselle," he said, with a quick short sigh, "you will never want for helpers."

"I want them often."

He looked at her wistfully, but did not speak.

Vera resumed somewhat sadly. "I have well-wishers, acquaintances by the score, but I am ill able to spare a friend."

"Have I been a friend, mademoiselle?" he said gently. "I wish I better deserved the name. A poor, penniless wretch, disinherited, disowned, exiled, and disgraced. Do you know that I am

all this, and more ? I would gladly do anything for you that lay within my power ; but now I have no power, no dignity, no name. Mademoiselle, I have nothing but the will to help you—the will and the heart——”

Was there not a suspicious moisture in those hollow eyes beneath their heavy blue-veined lids ? He was so weak still, and in such trouble and perplexity of mind, that possibly tears *had* risen unawares. He did not finish his sentence. He took Vera's hand, and held it silently for a moment, then leaned back with a heavy sigh and a startling change of colour. She thought that he was faint, and offered him smelling-salts and sal-volatile ; but he declined them with a word of thanks.

“ I have something to tell you about myself,” he said presently ; “ but I am afraid I cannot do it to-day. I have not the strength as yet. Will you kindly remember, mademoiselle, do you think, that I have something about myself to say ? ”

“ I am not likely to forget.”

“ I want to tell you a little of my real life, my real history, some day when you are at liberty to hear it, and I am strong enough to speak. I think,” he added with a smile, “ that something more than physical strength will be required.”

“ I shall be glad to hear it when you are able to tell it to me.”

“ I should soon be able to do anything if I saw much of you, mademoiselle. Do you know what your visit is to me ?—a draught of fresh water to a thirsty man, a cup of wine to one who is faint with weariness. I thought at one time, not long ago, that I was going to die ; and I wondered in the midst of my delirious dreams whether you would be sorry. Would you have been sorry, Vera ? ”

His utterance of her name thrilled her with emotion. He had used it only once before, and that was when he led her away from Davy's deathbed. Vera could not speak, but her brimming eyes perhaps spoke for her. Her hand lay in his once more ; his thin fingers had closed on it so tightly that it could not easily be withdrawn. She did not want to withdraw it ; she could not have wished it in another place.

The sound of a footstep recalled them to themselves. Vera gathered up the papers that he had given her, and placed them with the locket inside her dress. It was understood between them that they should write to one another from time to time. She dared not promise him another visit.

Mr. Longmore's entrance caused their farewells to be of the shortest. Vera made her way downstairs, ceremoniously accompanied by Maurice's friend (who was not at all charitably disposed to her at that time); but on reaching the door she found herself confronted by the stern and haughty countenance and towering height of her cousin Gaston.

The pony-carriage was at the door, but Lance was nowhere to be seen. Mr. Longmore exchanged a very cool greeting with Gaston, who immediately offered Vera his arm, and led her to her seat with an air of proprietorship of which she did not approve.

"Where is Lance?" she asked.

"Gone. I will drive you home," said Mr. Ravenscroft, gathering up the reins and flicking the ponies' ears with the lash of his whip.

"But where has he gone?" she repeated somewhat anxiously. "He promised to meet me at Garrow's."

"I sent him back," said Gaston with a masterful accent.

"You?"

"I. Why not?"

"Because," said Vera, irritated by his manner almost beyond endurance, "he is not under your

control, but under that of my grandfather, who placed me in his care for the afternoon."

"Fine care," said Gaston, emphasising every syllable with cold distinctness, "which allowed you to plan and carry out an assignation with Maurice Guyon."

"You must withdraw that word," Vera answered proudly, "if you wish me ever to speak to you again."

"It was not arranged with Frank Longmore yesterday?"

"Most certainly not."

"I withdraw the word. I apologise," said her cousin with no abatement of the haughtiness of his manner. "And now allow me to inquire whether you think it a right and fitting thing that a young lady should pay a visit to a young man at the inn where he is staying, and remain in private conference with him for upwards of half an hour?—a conference from which she emerges with pale cheeks, reddened eyes, and a general appearance of agitation, sufficient to set all curious observers (of whom there were plenty) talking about her? Is it right that she should choose to set conventionalities at defiance in that way?"

"Once for all," said Vera resolutely, "I will give you my answer to the kind of remark which

you seem to be fond of making. You speak of me as 'a young lady.' A lady I trust I am in thought and feeling, if in nothing else ; but not in the sense that I am either unable to work or to act for myself. I am a public singer, Mr. Ravenscroft, not a young girl who has been brought up in a quiet home, tenderly nurtured, delicately reared, and spared the knowledge of anything dark or evil. I know good from bad, and I mean to choose the good. But if the good that I choose leads me into paths which your conventional rules do not sanction, then it is the conventionality that I shall sacrifice and not the good."

"You speak rashly, Vera. No woman is safe out of the beaten track—least of all you, with your love of romance and your enthusiastic nature."

"I would rather be unwise than ignoble."

"You mean that you would rather peril your reputation than deny yourself a passing caprice!"

"I value my reputation as much as any other woman," she replied. "But I will never be so cowardly as to let the fear of perilling it keep me from doing an act of kindness or of justice to a fellow-creature. I am not imprudent, indeed; and I have never found that scandal was very busy with my name; but I will continue to be

my own judge as to what is right and wrong for me to do. If people speak against me I will bear their calumnies patiently. Calumny is what we singers are trained to expect."

"A singer, indeed!" Mr. Ravenscroft exclaimed with impatience. "You are not one by necessity. You are a young Englishwoman, well born, well connected; the grandchild of a large landed proprietor, and the presumptive heiress of a fortune. Why not lead the life to which you are called by your birth and by your prospects?"

"Well connected and well born, am I?" Vera said ironically. "Did you never hear my father's history? I have been at some pains to find it out. He was a poor musician who gave lessons on the violin, the son of two strolling players who used to sing and play in the streets on summer nights. I have an inheritance of music and of vagrancy, and I am prouder of my descent from the Marlitts, who represented the jongleurs and troubadours of an earlier day, than of my relationship to all the Herveys and Ravenscrofts of Lincolnshire."

"You say so, but you know very well that you are treating me to a bit of stage clap-trap and sentiment."

"Far from it. I am a child of the people on

my father's side ; not a young lady who shrinks from the impropriety of visiting a sick man who has been her comrade and friend, just when he is returning from the very verge of death."

"But Maurice Guyon——"

"I have done no more for him," Vera broke in impetuously, "than I have done for others—not so much ; for I have not visited him and helped to nurse him day by day as I have done with many another of my friends. I am a woman as well as a singer ; and those whom I can help I will."

"What help did you afford this afternoon?"

"This afternoon I had business to transact with him."

Mr. Ravenscroft gave the ponies a sharp cut with the whip, and made answer in a way which effectually checked the course of Vera's rapid indignant speech.

"Tell me," he said, "that this man is not your lover, Vera, and I shall be satisfied."

For a moment Vera was too much astounded to reply. Before she had recovered her self-possession, some remembrance of certain words and looks on Maurice Guyon's part brought the hot colour to her face and caused her tongue to falter as she replied.

"If I had thought him so, I should never have gone to see him," she said with coldness. But the answer was given too late; her hesitation and blush had borne a meaning to Gaston's mind which she never meant them to convey.

For some moments he did not speak at all. From a glimpse that she caught of his face, she knew that he was in a towering rage. She herself, hurt and offended, resolved not to utter another unnecessary word.

It was at this point that they overtook Lance. He was walking languidly enough, and looked weary and dejected, but he took off his hat and smiled at Vera as she passed him by. Gaston vouchsafed him neither word nor look. Vera waved her hand to the boy, and glanced back at him once or twice: a manifestation of sympathy which did not escape her cousin's attention.

"You think I treated him badly?" he said with apparently an abrupt change of subject.

"Yes."

"You think I am unjust to you?"

"Always."

"And you wish me to believe that you are not in love with Maurice Guyon?"

She was silent. Such a question, she thought, deserved no answer.

He gave her a hasty glance and then resumed.

"I do not mince matters. It is better that one man, at least, should tell you the truth. I know that those are the three topics uppermost in your mind at present. I can offer you a solution of every difficulty. I promise to treat Lancelot with consideration and respect. I vow most solemnly to trust you, to believe in you—nay, what am I saying?—to make manifest in every word and deed the faith in you that I already have, and would not lose for worlds; I will never interfere concerning any further token of friendship that you may show to Mr. Guyon (and that is saying much, Vera), if you will silence the slanderous tongues of the world, and make yourself a refuge from misconception by taking a step which will place you in a safe and honoured English home. Become my wife, Vera. Do I need to tell you how much I love you?"

"Am I dreaming?" Vera said. "Is this the voice that has accused me of unwomanliness and romantic folly so often? Be serious, Mr. Ravenscroft, if you please: this is no subject for your scornful jesting."

"Scornful?" he said, turning round with his eyes alight. "It is you who scorn me, who irritate me almost to madness, Vera, by your

light rash words! Can you not see that my impatience has arisen simply from the desire that I have to set you on a higher pedestal than other women, the dislike to see you descend from it, and the intolerance of the claims of others upon your attention! I have not been amiable, I acknowledge; but were you once my wife, Vera, you might lead me where you would."

"Impossible. I will not listen to you, Mr. Ravenscroft. Pray do not speak on this subject again."

Vera tried to speak in a tone of indignation, but in spite of herself her voice quivered. She was amazed and offended, but she was also a little alarmed at Gaston's tone. He himself laughed cynically.

"So easily said!—'No more on that subject.' Not so easily done, however. I fancy that you are destined to hear a good deal more on that subject, Vera. I have obtained your grandfather's permission to address you, and I do not mean to be content with one demand or one refusal. Think over the matter. We will talk of it again by and by. I think that mine is a prior claim to that of anybody else."

"Would you have me become your wife out

of gratitude for what you did for me when I was a child? I have not the shadow of a warmer feeling towards you."

"I would have you become mine for any reason, on any pretext," he said, again turning upon her those dark eyes that seemed to glow like fire when they gazed into Vera's face. "Do you think that if you were mine, my own, *my* Vera, I could not make you love me? You do love me, Vera; you will give me your heart at last! You will never let me plead to you in vain?"

His voice had grown soft: a strange emotion was visible in his strong dark features. He took his hand from the reins—they were driving slowly along a shady lane—and tried to draw her to him with his arm.

"Vera," he said, "my sweet, brave Vera, it will not be you who can say me nay? Do you know what a bitter life I have had that you can refuse to bring a gleam of brightness into it? All my hope is in you, my darling; you shall be my sunshine, my liege-lady, my queen. Vera, I have never sued to man or woman as I sue to you now for your love. Be merciful, and give me a little hope: I have waited long enough."

"I would if I could," she answered, her eyes

g with hot tears. "But I have no love to you."

None, Vera?"

None."

Ah, my sweet, you are not sure. Listen :
I'll say no more ; I will not accept an answer
I have spoken in haste ; but I am not
that I have spoken. You will remember,
you will relent."

Never."

Don't be too confident, Vera. Something
my heart tells me that I shall win you yet."

They turned in at the gates of Netherby
or, and to Vera's great relief the interview
ended naturally to an end.





CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE BARONESS' GARDEN PARTY.

MR. HERVEY was especially gracious to Vera at dinner, but a little colder and more sarcastic with Lance than it was his custom to be. When Vera was alone with the boy she begged him to tell her what had happened between him and Mr. Ravenscroft.

"You know," he said, "I drove up to the 'Dragon' to see if you were ready; and as soon as I stopped, I saw Mr. Ravenscroft talking to the barmaid——"

"It was unjustifiable interference," said Vera warmly.

"Well, when he saw me he left off talking to the barmaid, and came out with a countenance as black as night. He stood by the carriage for a minute or two without speaking, and then said: 'I suppose you know what you have done.' 'What

have I done?' I said. 'You were trusted to drive Mademoiselle de Lusignan to Mickleham,' he said, speaking almost in my ear, 'and you have been fool enough to allow her to visit a man whom——' Vera, you will be angry with me if I go on."

"Not with you, dear Lance. Go on. 'A man'——?"

"'A man whom all her friends have been desiring to keep from her presence for the last six months; an escaped convict of notoriously bad character.' Was it true, Vera?"

"Not in the least; but go on."

"'You see what mischief you have done,' he said in his cold stern way. 'Now go home, and leave me to repair it. Settle the matter with Mr. Hervey as best you can; he will hold you accountable.' 'But Vera will expect to find me here,' I said. 'I will explain the matter to her,' he said. 'Get down. If I have to tell you a second time, you will repent it.' And so, Vera,—you may think me very spiritless if you like,—but I could not enter into a contest with him then and there, and I came away."

His dejected tone touched Vera. "He was very unkind and very much mistaken; but never mind, Lance. My grandfather was not vexed, was he?"

“He said nothing to me about it—exactly.” And it was after a little hesitation that Lance proceeded to recount that Mr. Hervey had looked at him with curiously twinkling eyes on his return, and said: “‘So you’ve been getting into hot water with Gaston Ravenscroft, have you? Mark my words, boy; don’t do that once too often.’ And that was all.”

Vera was reassured. She wished, however, that Mr. Hervey would be frank with her; she did not like the notion of his giving permission to Gaston Ravenscroft to ask her in marriage without consulting her upon the subject. She thought of speaking to him about it; but Mr. Hervey was difficult to approach upon a serious matter, and she shrank from making the attempt.

Gaston’s proposal made her task with respect to poor Lucy’s relics very distasteful. She resolved, however, to speak or write to him on the day after her visit to Maurice Guyon; and for that purpose she went to the Hall, where a tennis match was to be played that afternoon, at a somewhat earlier hour than usual. She knew that she could not decline the Baroness’ invitations without good reason: otherwise she would have sent an excuse and begged Gaston to come to her; but Madame Waldstein’s questions and

remarks were not to be contemplated without a shudder. Besides, the Countess Zaranoff was leaving Netherby next day and carrying Olivia with her to London, and Vera knew that duty required her to go and say farewell to both.

As soon as she arrived at the Hall she found, however, that she was not likely to have much chance of speaking in private with Gaston Ravenscroft, for the Baroness immediately beckoned her to a seat, put up her eye-glass, and surveyed her leisurely from head to foot.

"Really," she said, "you look remarkably quiet for the character I hear of you. Is this behaviour on your part a development of professional life, my dear, with which we have yet to acquaint ourselves?"

"I do not understand you, madame."

"I am sorry that I express myself so badly, my dear. I only want to know about this man at the 'Dragon' who is so great a friend of Frank Longmore and of yourself."

The Baroness was sitting in her great easy-chair beside the window. The Countess Zaranoff was standing on the verandah in low-toned conversation with Gaston, but as Madame Waldstein's words reached her ear she paused and turned round. Gaston also looked in the direction of

his mother's chair with an expression of decided annoyance.

Madame Zaranoff's appearance was very striking. She was still in mourning for her husband; but the brilliancy of her beauty seemed to be enhanced by the sombre hues that she was wearing. A yellow rose in her bosom formed the only spot of colour in her dress. Her face was pale, with the creamy paleness which is more lovely than a rosy hue; her dark eyes were soft as velvet in their depths of lustrous brown; her features regular and beautiful. There was, however, a certain squareness of the jaw which one did not at first detect; the curved lips were not tender or amiable in repose; but the harmony of colouring was so perfect that it was difficult to convince oneself of this slight defect in contour, and the red lips smiled so graciously that their real want of sweetness passed unobserved. Such, at least, was the impression of Ilma Zaranoff's appearance made upon Vera de Lusignan; and the faint distrust produced by that artificial softness and graciousness was not easily dispelled.

Although Frank Longmore had been in Mick-leham for two or three weeks or more, he had not presented himself at any of the houses in a

neighbourhood where he had many acquaintances, and it was only in consequence of an accidental meeting with Madame Zaranoff in the street that he had been persuaded to call upon her at the Hall. As he was the son of so old a friend this avoidance of her house had seemed a little odd. Hence, perhaps, Madame Waldstein's curiosity, and the Countess' sudden manifestation of interest.

"A friend of Frank Longmore's?" she asked, coming forward. "I am always interested in Frank's friends. Who is that?"

"Vera knows him; I do not," said the Baroness. "As we have already heard, Mr. Longmore has been in the town for nearly a month, in close attendance upon this dear friend of his."

"So he acknowledged the other day. Who is this friend, Mademoiselle Vera? Can you tell us his name?"

"His name is not an English one," Vera answered. "He is called Mr. Guyon."

"Guyon?" The Countess started; a slight flush tinted the paleness of her beautiful face; she continued laughingly. "It is a friend of whom I have never heard. Guyon? It is a French name; I have heard it before. From what country does he come then—ce Monsieur Guyon?"

It was one of Ilma's affectations that she preferred the use of the French language to any other.

"He is a Russian, madame. His full name is Maurice Guyon."

Some feeling of resentment at this continued questioning added especial distinctness to Vera's utterance. She would not be accused of wishing to conceal her friend's name. She looked calmly at Gaston's ill-satisfied countenance as she spoke, neither seeking nor avoiding the fiery glance with which he sought to overawe her.

Madame Zaranoff gave a slight start. She laid her hand upon the window-frame as if to support herself, and Vera noticed that the slight fingers had grown tense and rigid in their grasp. The smile still played upon her lips, but they were now deadly pale.

"And may I ask," said the old Baroness, waving her fan backwards and forwards as was her habit when she was about to say something particularly disagreeable, "what is the nature of the friendship between this unknown Russian gentleman and my young relative, Vera Marlitt—or De Lusignan?"

A queen could not have asked the question more superbly. Vera smiled to herself and made her answer very slight.

"I had business with him, madame; that was all."

Mr. Ravenscroft made an impatient gesture; Vera looked away, refusing to meet his angry eyes. Madame Waldstein broke out irately:

"How often am I to tell you to call me your aunt, Vera? You are a relation of mine; and I should be glad to hear you acknowledge the relationship."

"Vera does not value the ties of relationship," said Gaston in a suppressed tone.

"If *we* have acknowledged it, it is not for her to be so backward," said the Baroness haughtily.

"I beg your pardon, aunt; I will try to be more worthy of the honour," said Vera, not very seriously, for a mocking spirit had taken possession of her, and this assumption of having bestowed an immense benefit upon her by recognising the tie of kindred seemed to her somewhat arrogant.

"And your business, what was that?"

"Private business, connected with matters which I am not at liberty to name," Vera answered coldly. Then she added in a tone which she tried to render more gentle, "I am sorry to be obliged to give you so unsatisfactory an answer, aunt."

"Private business with a man of that kind!" said the Baroness scornfully.

"You forget, madame, that I am a professional singer."

"Ah, true," said Ilma Zaranoff suddenly, "we had forgotten that."

The exclamation drew general attention to her. She was still standing in the same attitude, with her head a little bent and her eyes fixed upon Vera's face. There was a look in her face which caused the Baroness to say quickly,

"What is the matter, Ilma? Are you not well?"

"Oh, perfectly well, madame, I thank you," she said, immediately changing her position and throwing back her head with a light jarring laugh; "but I was trying to imagine how Mademoiselle de Lusignan had made a friend of a Russian patriot!—for I am sure he was a patriot, was he not, mademoiselle? Bah! how I detest the Russians!" This last exclamation was couched in French, and uttered in a lower tone than the other part of the speech. "Did he rave about his country and those abominable Nihilists, mademoiselle, or did he simply beg for charity and assistance?"

"Neither, madame. The gentleman of whom we are speaking was far above both expedients. I do not think that either Mr. Longmore or my-

self would choose for a friend a man who raved—or who begged for assistance.” Vera softened the words by a very amiable smile, but said them with careful slowness and distinctness.

“Really, this becomes interesting,” said the Baroness, regarding her “young relation” through her eye-glass. “And what sort of person is this gentleman whose battles you are so ready to fight, Vera?”

“I can describe him better than Vera,” interposed Mr. Ravenscroft. “A good-looking adventurer with a glib tongue and a smooth manner, who has probably imposed upon her as he seems to have imposed upon Mr. Longmore; who, be it said *en passant*, does not strike me as troubled with any superfluity of brains.”

“Shall we tell him your opinion of him, Gaston?” said Madame Waldstein maliciously. “We invited him to play tennis with Olivia this afternoon, and, if I am not mistaken, I hear him at the door.”

She had the quickest ears of any old lady ever known. Almost before the words were out of her mouth, the door opened and Mr. Longmore was announced. Gaston made a sudden move towards the garden; but he was obliged to stay and greet the visitor. The Baroness put out her wrinkled

white hand with a triumphant little smile; Ilma gave him a quick and rather troubled look as she saluted him. Mr. Longmore himself wore a vacant and unintelligent air; Vera glanced at him and wondered how Maurice Guyon had come to make a friend of this perfectly-dressed and foolish-faced young fop; she quite agreed with Gaston in his estimation of Mr. Longmore's powers.

"Mr. Longmore," said the Baroness, without circumlocution, "we have been talking about your friend Mr. Guyon."

"Indeed, madame?"

"We think it an unusual sign of friendship that one young man should come all the way from London in order to nurse another who is ill."

"I hope—not unusual," said Mr. Longmore with a stammer.

"We think you must be very old friends," said Madame Waldstein, turning upon him her smiling face and inquisitive bright eyes.

"Very old friends indeed," Frank Longmore repeated in a tone which had as little meaning in it as a tone could possibly have. But suddenly Vera saw him raise his eyes anxiously to Ilma's face and then let them fall to the ground. Following that glance, she noticed also that Ilma Zaranoff had turned very pale. She moved ab-

ruptly and went out into the garden. Vera was puzzled by that interchange of looks.

The subject of Maurice Guyon's illness and of Frank Longmore's friendship for him dropped when other visitors were announced. Vera stayed until nearly seven o'clock, and then took her leave. Almost all the guests had gone: Lance and Olivia had disappeared, Madame Zaranoff and Frank Longmore were strolling about the garden, seemingly absorbed in very interesting conversation. Vera walked towards them, with Gaston at her side. The Countess was speaking more vehemently than she knew, and her words fell upon Vera's ears with startling significance.

"Why was he here at all? Why cannot he leave England? It was always so with Maurice—he is mad!"

Some word or gesture from Frank Longmore made her pause. She turned round and looked straight into the face of Vera de Lusignan.

Ilma's lips were white still, but her velvety brown eyes had a yellow gleam, which gave them an indescribable fierceness of expression. It seemed to Vera that the look was one of deadly enmity, and yet what had she done to provoke the enmity of Ilma Zaranoff?

But in a moment the fierce look went out of

her eyes, and her face settled into its usual expression of smiling amiability. She held out both her hands to Vera ; it would seem as if she desired nothing upon earth so much as to call Vera her dearest friend.

"I may hope to renew my acquaintance with you in town, may I not?" she said. "If you are in London this winter you will come to see Olivia and myself? I should not like to think that I had seen the last of 'Mademoiselle Vera.'" She gave a caressing pressure to Vera's hand as she spoke.

Vera mentioned her own address in town in reply. The Countess looked at her with her inscrutable expression and remarked softly,

"You will be there for a short time only, shall you not?"

"I think of remaining there for the winter, unless I accept an engagement at St. Petersburg," said Vera frankly.

Gaston frowned. A vivid light came into Ilma's face. "St. Petersburg! ah, you would like St. Petersburg. It is a beautiful place," she said. "But—excuse my asking the question—I thought that you were going to reside here for the future?—at Mr. Hervey's house, here, in Lincolnshire?"

"My grandfather and I have scarcely yet discussed that question," Vera answered with some coldness.

"Pardon! pardon! I did not know that it was yet undecided. Farewell, my dear Vera. I may call you Vera, may I not? Farewell."

She made a movement as if to kiss Made-moiselle de Lusignan; but Vera was taller than the Countess, and contrived to avoid the proffered salute without discourtesy. The four walked back to the house together, and then Gaston found time for a word in Vera's ear.

"Well done!" he said, with a laugh in his eyes and an amused look upon his face. "That parting embrace was cleverly avoided. That woman's air and graces are intolerable, pretty as she is; you would make a better countess, Vera."

"I have something to say to you," Vera said, looking straight before her and speaking hurriedly. "When can I say it?"

He cast an eager glance at her, and stopped in the middle of the gravelled walk. "Say it here," he said abruptly, "here and now."

"Oh, no, I could not do that. It does not relate to myself, Gaston—only to a story that I have heard——"

“Oh, then, it will keep,” he said indifferently, resuming his walk.

“No, it will not. Indeed, Gaston, I must tell it you to-day.”

“Why so earnest, Vera? Are you sure that it does not affect yourself, child? There are some things that I would listen to from you all day long.”

“It is nothing of that sort. It relates to your past life.”

“Ay?” said Gaston, raising his eyebrows. “Then”—with a reckless look—“I am sure that I do not want to hear it.”

“You *must* hear it, Gaston!”

“My dear Vera, I know what it is. You have heard some hash of a story about my—my earliest romance. Of course I had one; every man has. But mine is buried in a grave, Vera; you need never fear that it will revive or give you any cause for discontent. When we are married I will tell you the whole story. I don’t think I could do it now—certainly not with my mother looking on from the windows.”

“Will you come and see me, or shall I write what I have to say?”

“I’ll come and see you, my sweetest and best. Do you think I ever lose a chance of doing that?”

especially as I am going off to London to-morrow to escort her ladyship and Olivia. But I shall soon be back again."

"Will you come to-night—after dinner?" said Vera, who had tried in vain to silence him during the earlier portion of his speech. "And do not talk to me in that way; I do not like it at all."

"I will come at nine o'clock and talk to you in any way you please. Where shall this private conference take place?"

"In the library. There we shall not be interrupted."

Vera made her adieux to Madame Waldstein as expeditiously as possible; then walked home with Lance, who had returned, in company with Olivia, from a walk in the churchyard. He was full of merry talk and laughter on his way to Netherby Manor; so full of it, that Vera once looked at him in astonishment.

"Lance," she said, "you are what the Scotch call '*fey*.' You should not be so merry; it is an ill omen—at least an old friend of mine would have said so."

She was thinking of Davy.

"You are not usually such an ominous bird, Vera," said Lance brightly. "You are a night-

ingale, not a raven. And you must not be melancholy either—at least no more than the moon is melancholy—for you shine like her.”

“ Foolish boy ! ”

“ Yes, you shine, and Countess Ilma sparkles, and Olivia ”—the lad coloured and smiled as he said her name—“ Olivia *glows*.”

Vera laughed at his fanciful expressions, but liked him for them at the same time. To her there was something about Lance which was particularly attractive. He possessed a remarkable transparency of nature, one which had a certain quality of truth and purity about it not often found in boys of his age ; and his refinement of thought and feeling removed him far from that category. Passionately fond of music and poetry, full of romantic enthusiasm for all that was beautiful and good, tinged with a dreamy religious sentiment which he had certainly never learned from Mr. Hervey or the Ravenscrofts, he seemed—to Vera, at least, sometimes—to be “ too bright and good ” for common life, of too fine stuff to make a happy or a successful man. But as “ spirits are not finely touched but to fine issues,” Vera hoped that he would find his happiness and his success in some career in which he would not have to contend with commoner

tures, and where his own powers could find
eir full development. Lance was not formed
r contention—of this she was very sure ;
; was a poet born, though as yet he knew
not.





CHAPTER XXIX.

“INTOLERABLE PRESUMPTION.”

“MR. LONGMORE is unbearable!” said Olivia. “His eye-glass alone reduces him to the level of an inferior race, and his drawl is insufferable.”

Dinner was over at the Hall. Felicia had been summoned to the Baroness’ room. Ilma and Olivia were talking to Gaston Ravenscroft. The Countess was half reclining, half sitting in a low cushioned chair by the fire, which a touch of autumnal coldness in the air made acceptable. Its light was fitfully reflected from time to time in the diamonds which adorned her pretty hands as they lay, soft and white and warm, upon the velvet of her lap. Gaston stood in one of his favourite positions, with his elbow on the mantel-piece; now and then his foot touched the spaniel that lay upon the hearthrug. Olivia seemed restless. She glanced occasionally at the clock

upon the mantelpiece, and flitted impatiently about the room as if she were waiting for some one's arrival or for some appointed hour.

"Mr. Longmore does not always drawl," said Ilma, smiling.

"No, but then he is worse. *Then* he talks of horses."

"I thought that you yourself liked horses?"

"So I do; but I don't like a man whose soul never rises above his betting-book. 'No-o, I don't read,'"—with a fine imitation of Mr. Longmore's most artificial manner, "'too much exertion, don't you know? Newspapers—*Bell's Life, Field, Sportsman*—about as much as I can get through in a week.'"

"You will have enough to do, madame, if you are going to keep this wilful girl in order," said Gaston.

"I am not afraid," replied Ilma. "You will not summon her home before Christmas, will you, Mr. Ravenscroft?"

Gaston shook his head. "I do not rule the arrangements of my relations, Countess. My mother is queen; I am vicegerent only—eh, Olivia?"

"Dictator," said Olivia saucily.

"When Mr. Ravenscroft desires a thing he

generally contrives to obtain it," said Ilma, lifting her beautiful eyes to Gaston's face.

"I am glad to hear it, madame. All that I have to observe with regard to Olivia's stay in London is that my mother is pleased for her to go, and says that if she feels 'lonely she shall send for Vera to bear her company."

"Grandmamma took a great fancy to Vera," said Olivia complacently.

"She does not let her 'fancy' appear in conversation," murmured Gaston between his teeth.

"Oh, but you don't understand grandmamma. I beg your pardon, Uncle Gaston," said Olivia, recalling what she had said and colouring somewhat. "I know that I am only her granddaughter, but I have lived with her all my life, and you have been away so many years——"

"I think I understand my mother pretty well," said her uncle.

"But you don't always hear her talk of Vera behind Vera's back. She does not praise her to her face. 'She has a very pretty spirit, my dear,'"—and Olivia assumed her grandmother's voice and manner with the readiest grace in the world. "'And she is clever; not like poor Mabel Hervey, who never cared for anything but music.' Then again, 'Ask Vera for her dress-

maker's address, my dear. She dresses like a Frenchwoman.' And, lastly, 'You would do well to notice Vera's manners, Olivia; she comes into the room with the air of a queen—not a tragedy queen either. Really, the girl is presentable.'" Then Olivia's flexible voice sank into its natural key. "If you call these remarks no testimony, Uncle Gaston, I shall be sorry."

"Your love of mimicry will lead you into trouble some of these days," said Gaston with rather a displeased air.

"You won't be angry, will you, Uncle Gaston, if I say that you remind me of Mrs. Malaprop? 'Let me tell you, miss, that so much levity does not become a young woman.' It is what dear mamma has repeated from my earliest days, and grandmamma has been trying to teach me 'ingenuity and artifice' ever since. Excuse me for a few moments, will you, Ilma? I am going out for a little fresh air."

She ran away singing. Ilma and Gaston thus left alone were silent for a few minutes. Then Ilma spoke in her softest tones.

"That young gentleman—that 'ward' of Mr. Hervey's, who was here to-day—is he, then, to do nothing in the world? to have no career, no fortune, no ambitions? He is a charming boy."

"I am not aware of Mr. Hervey's intentions with respect to him," said Gaston coldly.

"But you know—you must know—that your niece is deeply interested in his welfare," said Ilma in a peculiarly silky and caressing tone. "Dear Olivia! she is so frank, so amiable. I think she hardly knows how much she betrays!" The Countess' voice sank almost to a whisper, as if she spoke to herself rather than to Mr. Ravenscroft.

Gaston took his elbow from the mantelpiece, left off teasing the dog, and stood erect.

"May I ask if you have anything to tell me concerning Olivia that I ought to know?" he said in a perfectly quiet voice, but with a decided darkening of his countenance.

"Nothing; oh, nothing!" said Ilma sweetly. "There is nothing to tell beyond what you and her mother know. Their intercourse is conducted in a charmingly English fashion. But Olivia is very beautiful, and poor dear Lancelot Aylmer is romantic and susceptible. Who knows?" She finished by a shrug of the shoulders.

"I understand," said Gaston shortly. "Thank you." Then, after a pause, "Where is she now?"

Ilma spoke almost in a whisper. "Gone to

meet him,” she murmured. “Gone to say good-bye.”

“Nonsense—pardon me!—impossible!”

“If you cross the fields and go into the lane you will meet them. I am sorry for dear Olivia, but—it is such a pity for her to engage herself to anybody yet! Pray, dear Mr. Ravenscroft, do not tell her that it was *I* who guessed the truth.”

“I think it can hardly be the *truth*, madame. If you will excuse me I will go and see. I think still that there is some mistake.”

And Ravenscroft went upon his way.

Meanwhile Vera was wondering why he did not come to her. Nine o'clock had struck, and there was no sign of him. At last she donned her hat and cloak and walked down the road towards the village. This road would lead her, as she knew, into the lane by the churchyard. The church and the Hall, as well as the village of Netherby, lay like an island between two roads, an upper and a lower one, these roads converging near the railway-station on the one hand and in the village itself upon the other. Mr. Hervey's house stood near the station, and it was almost as easy to reach the Hall by one road as by the other; but Vera took the lower,

as it was the one by which Gaston usually came to the Manor.

In this sheltered lane, not far from Hester Rowe's deserted cottage (for the old woman had never been seen in Netherby since the day of Maurice's visit to her), Vera noted three persons. There was Olivia, with head aloft and a scarlet colour in her cheeks. At her side stood Lance, holding her firmly by the hand, paler than usual, but prouder than Vera had ever seen him look before. There also was Gaston Ravenscroft, a tall and threatening figure, with frowning brow and voice which was none the less stern and angry for being preternaturally calm. His shoulder was turned to Vera; she was close upon him before he observed her. Olivia shot a pleading glance at her; Lance seemed to see nothing but Mr. Ravenscroft's dark face.

"Your intolerable insolence passes all bounds," Gaston was saying deliberately. "Once and for all, there shall be a stop put to this nonsense. *You* marry my niece, indeed! Let Miss Ravenscroft's hand go, sir. Olivia, go home."

"I shall not go home without Lance, Uncle Gaston," said Olivia very decidedly. "My mother knew that I was out with him. You have no authority to speak to him as you are doing."

"At any rate, I have authority to speak to *you*," said Gaston in a tone of stern displeasure. "I stand in your father's place, Olivia, although you choose to forget the fact. Let me have no more of this absurd folly. Go home and see if your mother will not agree with me in all that I have said. I will speak to this young man alone."

He started a little as he saw Vera, who had advanced to Olivia's side, but his brow did not relax. Lance turned to Olivia as if he cared not a whit for what her uncle said, and put his arm round her waist.

"My darling," he said, and the chivalrous deference of his manner, as well as the tenderness of the epithet, made Ravenscroft grind his teeth with rage,—"*my darling*, will you go home now—with Vera?" Gaston almost stamped as he heard the Christian name. "I want to speak to Mr. Ravenscroft: and whatever he may say, I shall be true to you, dear, and you—you will be true to me?"

There was a wistfulness of tone about this question which indicated some doubt in his own mind as to the answer. Olivia answered frankly and proudly:

"No one shall be unjust to you, Lance; no

one shall separate us without our own consent. You may be sure of that."

She allowed him to kiss her, which he did quietly and manfully, with neither haste nor trepidation, although Mr. Ravenscroft was looking daggers at them both.

"Olivia, go home," he repeated authoritatively. Then, with a slight softening of manner, he added, "Vera, will you go with her? I will come back presently—when I have disposed of this foolish boy. Well, what is it?"

Vera had laid her hand on his arm. "Be kind to them, Gaston," she said in an undertone, as she looked into his angry eyes.

"I have no wish to be unkind. Take Olivia off my hands: that is all. I will manage this youngster."

"Come, Vera," said Olivia quickly. "It is of no use pleading with Uncle Gaston for me. Neither Lance nor I need pleading for; do we, Lance? We trust each other."

"Always—for ever," the lad answered, with a fervent look in his great brown eyes. His face had flushed all over and was full of ardour and of hope.

The two girls went away hand in hand. Ravenscroft and Lance remained behind. Gaston's

arms were folded on his breast; his dark gaze was bent haughtily upon the slight and graceful lad, who braced himself for an inevitable struggle as he met that look of scorn.

"Now that the two ladies have gone," said Gaston with bitter emphasis, "I can more freely tell you my opinion of your conduct. It has been disgraceful, dishonourable, and underhand to the last degree, such as I should think that even you might blush for when you reflect on it."

Lance's blushes were tingling in his face already; but they came from indignation and not from shame.

"I do not know, sir, in what way my conduct can be called dishonourable," he replied.

"Do you call it an honourable thing to take advantage of your admission into my mother's house so far as to inveigle my niece into a clandestine engagement?"

"We are not engaged. I love Olivia, and I think that she loves me."

"Is the matter mended if we call it a clandestine love-affair instead of a clandestine engagement?" said Gaston. "You had no right, sir, to breathe a word into her ear upon the subject until you had ascertained whether she would be permitted to listen to you."

"That is not a very natural view of the matter; excuse me for saying so," returned Lance. "Did you think in that way, sir, when you were young?"

"Your question is an impertinent one. I was not in your position."

"You refer to my future prospects, I suppose?" said Lance respectfully, but with spirit. "It is true that I have no great fortune; only what Mr. Hervey calls 'a modest competence.' But with that, and with the career that I hope to make for myself—if Olivia will wait for me——"

"What right have you to ask her to wait for you? Why should she waste the years of her youth on *your* account?" said Mr. Ravenscroft, whom this answer evidently exasperated. "It is intolerable presumption. However, I will put a stop to it. I will talk to Hervey myself. Remember that I forbid your speaking or writing another word to my niece. If you disobey me, I shall take Olivia abroad."

"Your precautions are needless," said Lance proudly, though with a paling cheek. "I shall not address her again for the present without your permission; but we shall wait for one another."

"Shall you indeed? She is eighteen, and you, I think, barely nineteen or thereabouts. I should scarcely have interfered with your childish amusements, but for the necessity of repressing such insolent pretensions on your part at once. You ought to see that they are inconsistent with your position."

"That is the second time that you have alluded to my position. How is my position inferior to that of Miss Ravenscroft, sir?" said Lance, with a directness worthy of Olivia herself. "Personally, of course, I feel myself beneath her; and I am not rich; but my social position—is——"

He hesitated. Ravenscroft stared at him, swung round and walked a few steps in an opposite direction, then stopped again and seemed to reflect for a few seconds.

"I suppose," he said at last, in a tone that indicated some half-suppressed emotion (though whether of anger, indignation, or pity, Lance could not exactly tell), "I suppose that Mr. Hervey has brought you up in ignorance. I am sorry for it, but it is not my place to tell you—what all the world knows. Go home and ask Richard Hervey; then perhaps my objection to you will become intelligible."

"You have no personal objection to me, then?" said Lance in utter bewilderment.

Ravenscroft's temper seemed suddenly to have cooled. He turned towards a low country stile, the entrance to some meadows by which he could reach home more quickly than by the road; here he halted for a moment, and drew out his cigar-case.

"Personal objection?" he said coldly. "No; I suppose not. I know nothing of you personally. I object to you as a suitor for my niece's hand. That is all."

"But why? You say that all the world knows; surely I may know too!"

The colour was coming and going in Lance's sensitive face; his brown eyes wore an expression of doubt and dread. Ravenscroft glanced at him once; frowned as if he saw something that he did not like; then silently lit a cigar.

"Ask Richard Hervey," he said after a lengthy pause.

"No, sir, I will ask you. If you have a reasonable objection to my position, I have a right to know what that objection is."

Ravenscroft, with one hand on the stile and the other grasping his cigar, shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"It does not follow that I must tell you what it is. Well—if you *will* know—it is to be summed up in few words. You must see—if you have the ordinary share of brains—that your position has always been an anomalous one. The Ravenscrofts have prided themselves for centuries on the traditions of their family and their race. I do not say whether their pride has been a worthy or an unworthy one; I can only admit that I possess it in some degree myself. I for one, therefore, do not choose that my brother's daughter should ally herself with a man who lies under any disadvantage of birth. There, surely I need say no more."

"You have said too much or not enough," said Lance with quivering lips. "I—I—do not understand——"

"Are you a fool?" said Ravenscroft, again losing control over his temper. "My meaning is clear enough! Who were your parents? What is your name? Your reputed father has not chosen to give you his; and Heaven knows whether you have any right or not to the one you bear. I do not know. Judge for yourself whether the unnamed son of an unknown father is a lover whom I should welcome for Olivia Ravenscroft."

He cleared the stile with a leap, as he spoke, and began to make his way across the fields, without once looking into Lancelot's stricken face. He was not a mild man, not a merciful one; but even he shrank from meeting the incredulous despairing eyes of the boy, whose youthful happy dreams he had that day done his utmost to crush out of existence.





CHAPTER XXX.

“A WOUNDED SPIRIT WHO CAN BEAR?”

MR. HERVEY was sitting alone in his study, making neat and careful notes in a morocco-covered volume which was supposed by his intimate friends to contain a *résumé* of the opinions and conclusions at which he had arrived after a lifetime of profound study. It was thought that he would one day publish the contents of this little green notebook; in which case, as he himself sometimes vaguely hinted, a great revolution in the philosophical world might be expected. In the meantime he posed, to himself and his friends, as a great moral sage and a refined cynic, dissatisfied with everything in this world or out of it, including religion and ordinary morality, the standards of which he desired, like many another man, to raise (or to reduce ?) to his own level.

“Come in,” he said, with a faint gesture of

annoyance, as Lancelot's hesitating knock came to the door. "Is that you, Lance? Do you not know that I am never disturbed by anybody at this hour? However, I am delighted to see you, of course. I presume that you want something, as you come at so unusual a time. And—as you are here—tell me whether you think that lamp—the one with the reflector—ought not to be moved an inch or two to the right in order to throw the light a little more fully on the Corot. Vera thinks not; but Vera, with the best intentions, has not always a correct judgment in such matters. Move the lamp and let me try the effect."

Quietly, obediently Lance did what was desired, then stood with his back against the wall behind Mr. Hervey's chair whilst the old man made his observations.

"Nearly right. Yes. A little more to the left. That is right. Your eye is tolerably good: of course you have had advantages—h'm!—"

He murmured something which was inaudible to Lance, then leaned over the arm of his chair, and inspected the picture sideways through his eye-glass. The flicker of the small wood-fire in the grate rather interfered with the effects of light and shade. Absorbed in contemplation,

he almost started when Lance's voice, rough and broken with emotion, broke upon the silence.

"I have had advantages, you say, sir. That is true. I want to know why you gave me these advantages."

Mr. Hervey's gold-rimmed glass fell from his hand. He turned to look at Lance; but the boy's face was in shadow. He was standing in perfect quietness beside the window. But his voice had vibrated with a new pain, a new emotion, which made his guardian uneasy.

"Why I gave you these advantages?" he repeated in a tone of some surprise and even of offence. "It was surely natural that I should wish you to be brought up like any other gentleman? Living with me, of course you drank at the Pierian spring, as the old-fashioned poet calls it—you are not deeply read in the old English authors, are you, Lance? There is an edition, bound in calf——"

"I beg your pardon, if I interrupt you, sir," said Lance, who was determined not to be diverted from his point by Mr. Hervey's well-known habit of slipping away from any topic which did not happen to please him; "but I must ask you a plain question. How did I come to live with you at all?"

"How, my dear boy? In the natural course of events. You were left—orphaned; and I became your guardian."

"By my parents' wish, sir?"

"Well: hardly." Mr. Hervey smiled to himself, leaned back in his chair, and folded his hands lazily one over the other. "They were hardly in a position to arrange the matter; your mother died suddenly."

"And my father?——"

"Your father's history, my dear boy, would scarcely edify you. He lived abroad during the greater portion of your life. I will tell you more about him when you are a little older—say, one and twenty: one and twenty would be a very good age for hearing any interesting family details."

"I beg your pardon, sir, I think that I am old enough to have my doubts set at rest on one or two points, at least. Why should I wait and suffer the torments of suspense for two years longer?"

"Who has been talking to you, Lance? You have taken some new crotchet into your head, I see that," said Mr. Hervey. "What idiots people are! Well, I will gratify you. Ask what you wish to know, and have done with it, but re-

member that I do not promise to give you any answer."

"What was my father's name?"

"That, my dear Lancelot, is a question which I most decidedly decline to answer before the proper time. Some person has been vaguely indicated to you, no doubt, by the name of Captain Aylmer: Mitchell has spoken to you of him, I believe, not I: he was a connection of yours, certainly, but not your father. You have never asked me this before; if you had, you would have heard what I tell you now—and nothing more."

"One thing I must ask," said Lance passionately, "and I must be answered. Have I a right to bear my father's name or not?"

"I think I never gave you any reason to conclude that you had not," said Mr. Hervey thoughtfully.

"No, you did not; but I have been told to-day that all the world, except myself, knew my history—knew what I do not want to know from any one but you——"

Lance's voice broke: he could say no more.

"So it has come at last," said Mr. Hervey below his breath. "It is a little hard on him certainly—harder than I thought. Lance," he

added, "who has been talking to you about this?"

It was with a sort of gasp that Lance made answer: "Mr. Ravenscroft."

"Gaston Ravenscroft?" repeated the old man with a sharpness which he seldom showed; "Gaston Ravenscroft! and what has he to do with you? Come here, Lancelot: do command yourself, and let me hear the truth of all this. Why did he speak to you about that, of all subjects? Come here and sit down."

Lance came nearer, but stood with his arm on the mantelpiece and his head on his hand. He was ashamed of having been betrayed into any exhibition of emotion, and struggled hard for the self-command which his guardian advocated. It was with a tolerably firm voice, but changing colour, that he at last gave an account of his interview with Mr. Ravenscroft. He was astonished, and somewhat hurt, at the conclusion of his story, to hear a short sardonic laugh from the listener.

"Ha, ha!" Mr. Hervey muttered to himself in the depths of the great arm-chair. "Ha, ha! Ravenscroft said that, did he? I have a rod in pickle for Master Gaston one of these days, hypocrite that he is! I shall make him lower his crest yet, Lance."

"Is he mistaken, then? Is his story untrue?"

Mr. Hervey looked up at him, then down at his white hands with a curious change of expression. "What does it signify, my boy?" he said half pityingly, half carelessly. "In these days a man is what he makes himself, not what his ancestors make him. You must found your own family."

"It is true then? I am a——," The lad in his sensitive pride choked over the word that he had been about to utter, flushed crimson, and then grew deadly white. Mr. Hervey continued as if he had not heard the interpolation.

"I never myself saw why illegitimacy of birth should be considered a disadvantage, so long as it does not entail the usual disadvantages of want of education and refinement. In your case, Lance," said Mr. Hervey pleasantly, "these disadvantages were, through my efforts, spared to you. All things considered, you have not so much to complain of as most men in your position. I will not tell you the whole of your history, as the knowledge of it would embarrass you considerably at the present juncture; but I will make this remark, that you have lost little through your ignorance of your father's name;

in fact, your chief loss lies in the absence of a legal claim upon his property, which is considerable. Doubtless he will not let this absence of claim affect your prospects in the future."

"I thought," said Lance in a low pained tone, "that I—that some one had left me sufficient—I must have misunderstood you, or Mr. Mitchell, in some way."

"Mitchell is responsible for what he made you believe," said Mr. Hervey dryly; "I told him only that you would receive a competence upon your coming of age. And so you will; I have provided for that already."

"You, sir?"

"Yes, I. Don't run away with the notion that I am your father, Lancelot; if I were, I would have told you so by this time."

"Then I owe you great gratitude," said Lance, trying to speak firmly.

"I suppose that the world would say so," Mr. Hervey answered cynically. "Gratitude is a debt not often paid. It is a lost virtue."

"May I ask why you took this interest in me, sir?"

"You may ask, my dear Lance; ask anything you please; I use my own discretion as to my replies. Why I took an interest in you? You

were a pretty little fellow — destitute and so forth ; I had a fancy for you, and thought that you would be a pet and a plaything. You have answered your purpose excellently well," and Mr. Hervey surveyed the lad's lithe and graceful figure with some complacency. His face he could not see.

If Lance had been more skilled in the art of reading countenances, and less blinded by the crushing sense of his new position, he might have guessed from the expression of Mr. Hervey's lips and eyes that there had been other motives at work beside the one just mentioned. That one alone would have been totally insufficient to account for his crafty smile of triumph and half-malicious satisfaction. There was a pause, which Lancelot broke by saying :

"Will you add one more to your favours, sir ? Let me go away from Netherby. It is impossible for me to stay here any longer."

"Impossible to stay here any longer ?" said Mr. Hervey. "Think better of it, Lance : all things are possible."

"It is impossible," repeated the lad with a strange determination in his voice. "I will not live upon charity : I have no right to your home and your money, sir. I thank you for all that

you have done for me ; now I must go into the world and earn my living for myself."

"In what way will you earn your living?" said Mr. Hervey with cold derision. "What paths are open to you? What are you fit for?"

"Not much, I am afraid," Lance answered humbly. "But, if I can do nothing else, I can enlist."

"Throw away your chances in life? your chance of marrying Olivia? Are you a fool then, Lancelot?"

"Do you think that I would ask Olivia to marry me now?" said Lance, whose impulses all lay in the direction of a Quixotic generosity which was sometimes very far from wise. "I would rather fly from the place and never see her again. I cannot ask her now."

"When you are older, you will be wiser—a truism, my dear boy, which you would do well to remember. As for your project of enlisting, it is ridiculous. Have you a soldier's physique? have you the martial instinct? When I have decided what you are to do and to be, I will let you go; but on the whole," said Mr. Hervey, with another odd smile, "I do not think that I shall decide for the next two years; and so you may make up your mind to remain here,

face the matter out, and devote yourself to Olivia."

"It is impossible, sir," said Lance, in a tone of extreme agitation. "Do you not see how terrible a life it would be?—to see her always and know that I cannot speak—cannot ask her to be my wife! to know that every one—oh, I can't do it, I can't bear it: I will not stay."

"There is a virtue—a much overrated virtue to my mind—," observed Mr. Hervey, parenthetically, "which is known by the name of manliness. This virtue, my dear Lancelot, you are not exhibiting upon the present occasion."

"I know that I am not," said Lance bitterly, letting his head sink upon his folded arms upon the mantelpiece. "And yet I never thought it an overrated virtue."

There was another silence.

"Well," said Mr. Hervey at length, "has this very unpleasant interview come to an end? Half the happiness of life, Lance, lies in a refusal to fret over the inevitable. Why should you concern yourself about a name, a shadow? Would the world be more beautiful if the blood of all the Howards ran in your veins? Is life less rich, is art less consolatory, I ask you, because you were born out of wedlock? You are un-

philosophical: I might almost say that you are absurd. Look your destiny in the face, and you will conquer it."

Lance lifted his head. A gleam of firelight flashed upon it and showed it to be so white, so drawn and aged with pain, that in spite of his cool sentences Mr. Hervey winced and frowned.

"You speak well, sir," said the boy, in a tone of bitterness which no one perhaps had heard before from Lancelot's lazy smiling lips, "but either you do not understand what this information is to me, or, understanding it, you choose to treat me cruelly."

"Cruelly!" Mr. Hervey's tone waxed sternly contemptuous. "How many years is it since I saved you from that peaceful abode of poverty, the workhouse? If I thought that you knew what you were saying I might show you some displeasure for that speech, but you are raving, my good lad, simply raving. Let me hear no more melodramatic speeches, I entreat; they are in bad taste as far as you are concerned, and excessively trying to my nerves. Don't you think it is almost time that you went to bed?"

Lance moved towards the door as if he scarcely knew what he was doing; then, suddenly collect-

ing his thoughts, he turned back to Mr. Hervey with a very pale and downcast face.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said almost inaudibly, "if I have displeased you. Indeed, I am grateful to you, and I will try to follow your advice."

"That is right, my dear boy. You have always been perfectly satisfactory in your relations to me hitherto; and I see no reason why matters between us should be changed! May I trouble you to ring the bell? And—Lance, another request: I must ask you not to reopen this subject. When I have anything to say I will let you know."

"Very well, sir."

If Lance had looked for some sympathetic pressure of the hand, some kindly reassuring word of affection, he looked for it in vain. Mr. Hervey leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. Lancelot took himself out of the room, he hardly knew how; he went slowly upstairs and locked himself into his own room.

"Am I right or wrong?" the old man considered, as he awaited his servant's arrival. His face looked like a waxen mask as it lay with its closed white eyelids and colourless features against the deep-red background of his high-

backed chair. The scene had agitated him more than he liked to confess. "Am I right or wrong? The boy takes it sadly to heart. Still, he must know the truth sooner or later. But that it should be Gaston to tell him so much of the truth!—meddlesome fool! if he does not want the boy for himself and his niece, why can he not leave him to me? Gaston has behaved abominably—but then he always does behave abominably, as far as I can see. Poor Lance! I hope that he will be reasonable. There would have been a fine uproar if I had told him his father's name." And Mr. Hervey laughed once more to himself, but wished that he could forget poor Lance's miserable face.

Lancelot's physical constitution was not a strong one: it was easily jarred. At present it seemed to him that every nerve in his body throbbed with pain: he was dizzy and sick as though he had received a frightful blow. Henceforth, then, he must feel himself an outsider, an intruder, in the very house which he had called his home! Never again, he said to himself, with the painful exaggeration to which youth is prone, could he look his friends in the face without remembering the cruel words in which Gaston Ravenscroft had pronounced his doom.

He was almost beside himself with misery. The poor lad could see nothing at that moment in its proper light, or call anything by its proper name : for the time being joy and hope had left him, and his strength had ebbed away.

One can hardly wonder if some few hot and bitter tears escaped him in the solitude of his own chamber. Their very bitterness assisted him, perhaps, to make a resolution, the carrying out of which afterwards proved to have been the turning-point in his career.

He set to work quietly enough to select such articles of clothing as would have been necessary on one of the holiday expeditions of which he had once been fond : he packed a small black bag with these—not forgetting some precious manuscripts which he hoped might be of service to him ; then he changed his own clothes and examined the contents of his purse. He had five pounds in his possession ; this money he would keep and refund to Mr. Hervey as soon as he was able to do so. Then he sat down and wrote two letters, both short, although they took him some time to compose : one to Olivia Ravenscroft and one to Mr. Hervey.

When the house was silent he crept quietly down the stairs. He entered Mr. Hervey's study

and placed the letters in a conspicuous place upon his little table. Then he unbolted a side door, by which he had often made his way into the garden at untimely hours, and left the house. His powers of endurance had failed him ; he had quitted Mr. Hervey's roof with the full intention of never returning to it until he had gained for himself a name and standing in the world. Some day, perhaps, he said to himself, he should come back to claim Olivia.

There are so many who have wrecked their lives by yielding to some impetuous impulse, some mad impatience with their destiny, such as swayed the actions of this poor lad Lancelot, that it behoves us to be merciful in our judgment of his conduct with all its rash passion and unreasoning pride. We have no need to be hard upon him : he suffered the full penalty of his folly in the days that were yet to come.





CHAPTER XXXI.

HIS SON AND HEIR.

THERE had been no conversation possible between Vera and Gaston Ravenscroft on the evening of his interview with Lancelot. He had absolutely refused to listen when Vera touched upon the subject on which she wished to speak. "Not to-night, Vera, for mercy's sake," he said in a vexed tone. "I can't listen patiently to anything. I'll come and see you to-morrow before I go. No, I won't listen now." And she was forced to relinquish the attempt.

She breakfasted alone next morning, wondering that Lancelot did not meet her as usual in the dining-room. Mr. Hervey always breakfasted at a later hour in his study. Scarcely had she finished her meal, when a tremendous peal of Mr. Hervey's bell alarmed the whole

household ; and in a few minutes she received an unwonted summons to his room.

She found Mr. Hervey in an extraordinary state of excitement. It was perhaps the tint of his violet velvet dressing-gown, which gave his face that look of yellow pallor ; but his hand shook as it clutched the letter that Lance had left behind, and his voice, usually so smooth, was husky and strained with emotion.

“Do you know anything of this mad proceeding ?” he began.

“I know nothing. What has happened, grandfather ?”

“Happened !—he has left the house—run away, the young fool ! the idiot ! After all that I had done for him, all that I expected, he has gone off in the night leaving a few lines of farewell, saying that he means to make a name and a career for himself, silly boy ! Read the letter and you will see for yourself what a fool he is.”

Mr. Hervey’s twitching features, trembling hands, and wandering, furious eyes, showed so much more agitation than might have been expected from a man of his temperament, that Vera stood aghast.

“Can nothing be done ? Can he not be followed ?”

"I have sent Marsh to the station, and James has gone for Ravenscroft—I'll tell him to his face what he has done. It is his fault, sneering cold-hearted scoundrel that he is!"

"Gaston?"

"Yes, Gaston. Gaston, who wants to marry *you*: he shall not have you until he brings the boy back, I promise him. It is he that has driven Lance to desperation—he and I between us, for I have been a fool too!" said Mr. Hervey, turning away with a gesture of despair and fury. "How was I to tell that he would take the matter so much to heart? It is Ravenscroft's cursed pride and love of meddling that are to blame; if he had held his tongue the secret might have been kept until it suited me to reveal it. But now—now—I will tell him what he has done, and see whether he can blush for shame or not!"

His voice died away in inarticulate mutterings. Vera meanwhile perused Lance's letter, which ran as follows:—

"MY DEAR SIR—You say that you cannot allow me to leave Netherby. Your decision drives me to take the only course which seems possible to me in my position. I will stay no longer in a house where I am a dependant,

tolerated as 'a toy and a plaything,' nor in a neighbourhood where, as Mr. Ravenscroft tells me, 'every one knows my story but myself.' If I have no name or fortune of my own, I will make both, and return when I have won the right to ask Miss Ravenscroft to be my wife. I thank you for your great kindness and generosity towards me, and beg you to forgive me for my sudden departure."

Here the letter ended abruptly. There was no signature.

"Did you ever read so wild a production?" said Mr. Hervey, as Vera laid down the letter without speaking.

"Poor boy!" she answered. Her eyes were full of tears. "He was very miserable when he wrote that letter, grandfather. But—I do not altogether understand it. There was some other reason for his going, then, beside Gaston's refusal to allow his engagement to Olivia?"

"Of course there was. Does he not say so?" exclaimed Mr. Hervey angrily. "Of course there was the question of his parentage—though how Gaston had the insolence to cast *that* in his teeth I cannot imagine! As for every one's knowing his story, I shall call Ravenscroft to account for that statement. Ravenscroft does

not know it himself. Nobody does know it but Leonora and myself." By Leonora he meant Madame Waldstein.

"Is he not your ward? Not the son of a Captain Aylmer?"

"No, he is not," retorted Mr. Hervey, "though Aylmer has been a very convenient stalking-horse when I chose. Neither is he *my* son, as Gaston fancies. Oh, I have a very pretty surprise in store for Gaston."

Vera turned upon him suddenly. "Who was his mother?"

"You will not be much the wiser if I tell you," said her grandfather. "His mother was Lucy Moore. He is the boy whom a certain foreign fellow was looking for this spring, in order to hand over a sum of money left to him by the fiddler, Davy Rowe. The amount, as I gathered, was not so considerable as to make it worth my while to put anybody on the track of identifying him. I can't congratulate that man Guyon on his success as a detective, though he did give me something of an alarm when he came."

"Oh, grandfather! what have we done!"

"Done? nothing but what was for his good. The boy has repaid me with the vilest ingratitude,"

said Mr. Hervey, walking up and down and working himself into a rage again. "He has ruined his own prospects: I will have nothing more to do with him: I wash my hands of him once and for all. But for Gaston Ravenscroft's unbearable temper, Lance would have been here now."

"But," said Vera, with a look of bitter regret and consternation, "Gaston never knew that Lancelot was his own son?"

"Know! of course he did not. And how do *you* know?" said Mr. Hervey, suddenly stopping in his walk. "How do you know that Gaston had anything to do with the matter?"

"Because I have in my possession the marriage-certificate of Gaston Ravenscroft and Lucy Moore," said Vera steadily.

"You—you—have what?" Mr. Hervey stared at her as if he thought that she had taken leave of her senses. "Do you know what you are saying, Vera?"

"Perfectly. Gaston married her in London. If Lance is Lucy's son then he is also Gaston's son and heir."

"Impossible!" said Mr. Hervey harshly. "Gaston's mother assured me that they were never married. The boy was about to be sent to the workhouse when I——"

"I know you took him from the Rowes' cottage, promising to take him to Mickleham Union, where he never arrived: you kept him and brought him up as your own ward," said Vera quickly. "But, oh, grandfather! why did you not tell Gaston? *He* thought that his son was dead."

"And for aught I know Gaston's son *was* dead," said her grandfather fiercely. "This child—a waif and stray—arrived with Lucy at Hester Rowe's cottage. I own that I thought it likely that the boy *was* her child; but you must remember that if you undertake to prove that Ravenscroft had a legitimate son, the question of identity will at once be raised."

It seemed as if Mr. Hervey was unwilling to allow that Lancelot's legitimacy was a thing possible to be proved.

"I have proof," said Vera.

"Proof, have you?" He looked at her for a few moments and then uttered a deep groan. "Good God!" he said; "what will Ravenscroft say? And the poor boy! the poor boy, who has suffered all this misery for nothing!"

He sat down and shaded his eyes with his trembling hand. It was so seldom that he gave any sign of human tenderness that Vera's heart

was moved at the sight of his emotion. She had never loved him so well before. But she stood mute, for she was certain that he would resent sympathy as the direst insult that could be offered to him.

She was also terribly disturbed. She blamed herself severely for delaying so long to give Gaston the papers and the information to which he certainly had the right, although, as a matter of fact, the delay had been caused by Gaston's unwillingness to listen rather than by her own tardiness; after all, she had possessed the papers only for a day and a half at most. But she regretted that short delay most bitterly.

"You know, Vera," said Mr. Hervey, after a long pause, in almost a pleading tone, "I thought that I was doing the boy a service. I thought that nobody wanted him, and that Gaston had acted badly to that girl—the whole matter was in bad taste, too, according to Leonora's version; and I fancied that it would be a pleasure to bring up the child, as I had none of my own, and give him the education that I thought Gaston would have denied him. Besides, I always disliked Gaston, and I—well, well! the matter has been bungled. Whether I meant

well to Lance or ill to Gaston, my plans have all failed now."

"Did you mean ill to Gaston?"

"I meant some day to punish him through his son; I meant to wrest from him a suitable provision for the lad—either by fair means or foul——"

"Gaston would never have hesitated to provide for him, grandfather. And if you wanted to punish him for what you thought wrong in his conduct, you have certainly succeeded. Lance might have been with him for the last fifteen years, and made his life far happier than it has been."

"It signifies very little to me what Gaston's life has been," said Mr. Hervey coldly. "I am thinking of that boy. It is really extraordinary"—with a slight return to his usual cynical manner—"that at my time of life I should take his departure so much amiss. One would have thought that I should be accustomed to desertion by this time. But one does not readily accustom one's self to such things. I do not suppose that he fancies that I—that I care—particularly whether he goes or stays."

"You were very kind to him," said Vera softly.

"Kinder than I was to you, my dear," said Mr. Hervey, with sudden gentleness. He held out his hand to her; she was sorry to feel it tremble in her grasp. "I suppose that the world—with its crude ideas of right and wrong—would say that I had better have taken you to my home and given Gaston his own son to manage; but I—I thought differently."

"Gaston must be told," said Vera after a little pause.

"Yes; I feel myself in a somewhat embarrassing position in view of the facts that you have imparted to me," said Mr. Hervey with an uncertain smile. "He will not appreciate my difficulties—my motives. He is violent sometimes in his expressions. I hardly know how——"

"Will you leave the task to me, grandfather? I have a good deal to explain to Gaston: I will tell him everything."

"My dear Vera," said the old man, looking relieved, "I shall be much obliged to you. It is odd to think that though I have anticipated—not without pleasure—for many years the task of informing him that I had rescued his son from a workhouse and brought him up out of charity (that will gall Gaston a little too!), I feel now

almost as if I had been to blame, and am glad to lay the burden on a girl's shoulders. Vera, my dear, if you really choose to tell him the whole story, allow me to leave you. He shall be shown in here; and in the meantime I will dress, and drive over to Mickleham in order to make further inquiries respecting that boy's foolish flight."

He shuffled away, looking very worn and old, while Vera acknowledged to herself that the courage which seemed to fail him was at a low ebb with her too. But she was a brave woman, and she nerved herself for an interview which would task her powers to the utmost.

Gaston knocked at the door and entered unannounced, looking surprised to see Vera instead of Mr. Hervey, who had sent for him. He went up to her with an exclamation upon her paleness.

"You tired yourself last night, Vera," he said reproachfully. "Confess that you were fretting over the woes of those silly young people! And what is the news I hear? that the lad has taken himself off in the night?"

"Yes, Gaston."

"A very good thing too—for us. Remarkably foolish, as far as he is concerned."

"Be a little sorry for him, Gaston," said Vera wistfully.

He looked impatient, but smiled as he met the glance of her anxious eyes. "My dear," he said caressingly, "I wish the boy had been at the Antipodes before he troubled you. I can't profess to pine for him myself: I am even glad that he is out of the way. Being out of the way, I will acknowledge that I think he has had rather a hard fate. And now, where is your grandfather? I suppose he wants to thunder anathemas at me?"

He was so determined to treat the subject lightly that Vera found it difficult to reply.

"He wishes me to speak to you first," she said. "There is something that I have to tell you. Will you promise to hear me to the end, Gaston? and will you forgive me if I vex you?"

"I will forgive you anything."

He had placed her in Mr. Hervey's great arm-chair, and now leaned over the back of it and touched her cheek with a gentle hand.

"You are too white and worn to-day," he said. "You have been awake half the night, Vera. Come, tell me this wonderful piece of news and then go out into the garden: the air is warm and sweet this morning. Do you know

that I actually plucked some autumn violets for you on my way here? Gathering flowers is not a speciality of mine either!"

He held them before her. "It was kind of you to bring them," she said gently. "They are very sweet."

"If you like them I am content," said Gaston, laying the flowers in her lap. "And now, what is it, Vera? You have some shortcoming or iniquity to charge me with, or else you would not look so grave. Tell me my sins roundly; I like to be rated by you, and would not miss your sharp sayings for a great deal. What is it?"

"There are some papers that you must read. I have them here—with me. I will leave you to read them and come back in half an hour."

"Nonsense! why should you leave me? Stay where you are. I will read them with you."

"No, no. Let me go away, Gaston," she said, pleadingly. "It will be better; you yourself will like it better in the end."

"I shall do nothing of the kind. There are no papers relating to you and yours that I shall not like the better for your company."

"But they do not relate to me," said Vera, with a steady light in her grave gray eyes.

“They are about you and yours. Gaston, will you please forget—for a little time—that I am anything but a bearer of some very important tidings? Forget that I am Vera; forget that I am your cousin; remember only that I am your friend, and that I have known you for very many years?”

“You are the sweetest of remembrancers; but you ask what is very nearly impossible, Vera. However, to gratify you, I will make the attempt.”

“Will you tell me then, Gaston, why you have never spoken to me of your marriage with Lucy Moore?”

The light and the joyousness which had been rendering Ravenscroft's face unusually attractive vanished like a dream. He drew himself into an erect posture and moved away from Vera's chair with a haughty look.

“Oh,” he said, after a moment's pause. “Now I understand who told you to ask that question. Hervey?”

“Gaston,” she entreated him; “I should have a so much easier task if you would only trust me.”

“I trust no one,” he said coldly.

“And yet you asked me to be your wife?” she said, colouring.

His manner changed. His eye softened; he

drew a chair close to hers, sat down, and laid his hand upon her slight fingers. "I trust you as I love you—above everybody in the world," he said. "If I have told you nothing about that unhappy marriage of mine it has been because I did not like to reopen an old wound. I should have told you all—when we were married. But now I want to know who said anything to you about that story, Vera? My mother?"

"Before I was taken to your house, as a little child, I heard poor old Davy speak about you, Gaston. He said 'that you were a wicked man,' 'that you were not to be trusted,' and, though I did not know why, I guessed that you had some strange story which I was not to hear. But I understood what he had meant—what he had thought—when I knew more of your story. He was much mistaken."

Gaston pushed his hair off his forehead and frowned. "From whom did you hear more?" he asked.

"From David Rowe himself. I think you knew him."

"Yes; I knew him well. He was the son of Hester Rowe, who brought up—Lucy." Gaston uttered the name with a lowering of his voice, then rose and began to walk about the room.

"There seems to be a sort of fate on me," he said irritably; "a doom that I should never be allowed to forget that wretched mistake of mine. The consequences of it have dogged me all my life. They drove me out of England; they nearly made me end my days upon the downs at Elmstone. I suppose you know, Vera, that I was on the very point of killing myself when you found me?"

"I know."

"I was nearly driven mad by grief and desperation. I loved her wildly—madly. We had a boy, Vera; a fine fellow with eyes like hers; and we had lived in peace and happiness for years. We kept the marriage a secret, because I was so poor and feared lest my creditors should come down upon me. Philip's death set me free from that fear; but, just when we might have announced the marriage, just as I was thinking of bringing her back to Netherby in peace and honour and happiness, she—died."

"How, Gaston?"

"How? I don't know what you mean. She died here in Netherby. For some reason which I never could understand she left Elmstone (where we had been living for a few months) during my absence in Germany, and made her

way—against my wish; indeed, I may say, against my express orders—to the house of the person who had brought her up, Hester Rowe. On my return from Germany I discovered her absence, made inquiries, and heard—yes, heard suddenly, without the least preparation, Vera—that my wife and child were dead—dead and buried in Netherby churchyard. Do you wonder that my mind and my body both gave way for a time beneath the shock? I asked for no details; I left England before I could bear to talk to any one upon the subject; even now I would rather avoid it.”

“One moment, Gaston. It was after your illness that you came to Elmstone?”

“Yes. We had been happy together at Elmstone, in a cottage outside the town. It was there that my misery overpowered me; and but for you, Vera—you, who came to lead me back to life and love and hope—I should have blown my brains out upon the downs.”

“Forgive my asking this question, Gaston; have you ever considered the possibility of your son’s being still alive?”

Vera spoke tremblingly, for she feared the effect of her words. Ravenscroft started; the blood rushed into his face until it was almost

purple; his eyes flashed beneath his overhanging brows.

"You torture me by the supposition. Why do you ask me such a question?"

"It might be possible, Gaston; stranger things than that have happened. *Now*, will you read this paper—the first of several that I have to show you?"

She handed him Davy's statement of the manner of Lucy's death. He took it hesitatingly. His eye lightened as he glanced at her face. At first he seemed inclined to speak again; but, controlling himself, he walked away to the window, and there, with his back to her, began to read.

The time that he spent over this paper seemed like an eternity to Vera. He read it twice, then brought it back and laid it on the table at her side. His face was pale, and his lip was nearly bitten through; it was in a hoarse low voice that he compelled himself to say—

"That proves nothing."

"Yes, Gaston," she said, not daring to look at him. "That child—*her* child—did not die. It was only her little baby that died. But your Bertie—your boy—was taken away from the cottage."

"Ah, yes; to Mickleham Workhouse. My son a workhouse boy! What became of him then?"

"Think, Gaston. Remember who took him away from Hester Rowe's cottage. My grandfather never sent him to the workhouse. He liked him; took him abroad; sent him to school for a time; then—brought him home."

Ravenscroft's eyes were fixed on hers with the look of one who expects a blow; his lips were pale. "Go on," he said sternly. "What else?"

"My grandfather did not know of your marriage to Lucy. He gathered—from Madame Waldstein, I believe—that she had never been your wife, and that the child was a homeless waif and stray. He brought him up here, in his own house, and he called him—Lancelot Aylmer."

Gaston looked at her for a moment longer with an expression of incredulous pain and horror. Then he turned away, threw himself into a chair beside the table, and buried his face in his hands. He could not speak.

Vera drew near and laid her hand upon his arm.

"Dear Gaston," she said; "you will learn to love him yet—and to be glad——"

“Love him? be glad?” he said, lifting up his head and showing her a dark, discoloured countenance, inflamed and distorted almost beyond recognition by his passion of grief and rage; “love that boy whom I have driven from the only home that he had left? I only know that I shall never forgive those who have brought this thing upon me—that I shall never forgive myself! Do you suppose that my son will ever see in me anything but an open foe? I have been nothing else to him since I came back to England. It is intolerable! And the worst is that nothing I can do, or that anybody can do, will make amends for the misery of it all!”





CHAPTER XXXII.

GASTON RAVENSCROFT'S MOTHER.

MADAME WALDSTEIN had composed herself for her afternoon's siesta. The blinds were all drawn down, the house was silent; Alice, the maid, sat with her work in the dressing-room outside her mistress' door. Olivia and her mother were together; for, on hearing of Lance's disappearance, Olivia had openly refused to go to London with Madame Zaranoff, and the Countess, declaring herself unfortunately unable to remain a day longer, had left Netherby without her. Gaston, after starting early in the day for Netherby Manor, had not reappeared; all arrangements seemed to be overthrown and all ordinary work suspended. The Baroness alone took the matter quietly, and slumbered peacefully in the seclusion of her own apartment.

But into the midst of the stillness there came

suddenly the sound of a hasty man's footsteps upon the stairs. Alice started at the sound; Mr. Ravenscroft was usually careful not to disturb his mother's slumbers. Had he forgotten that she rested at this hour?

He tapped impatiently at the dressing-room door, then pushed it open. "Is your mistress in her room?" he said. "I must see her."

"She is asleep, sir."

"I cannot help it; let me pass. I will take the responsibility." And while Alice was still protesting, Gaston had knocked sharply at his mother's door and penetrated into that sacred domain.

"What is it, Alice? Is it four o'clock?" said a somewhat drowsy voice from the couch. Then, with a start of surprise and in a much more wakeful tone—"Gaston!"

- "I am sorry to disturb you," said her son, "but my business will not wait. I am going to London by the five o'clock train, and must speak to you before I go."

He drew the curtains aside, and allowed a flood of light to pour into the room. Madame Waldstein uttered a scream of protest. She was prepared neither for sunshine nor for visitors. Her complexion, untouched by rouge or pearl powder,

had lost its usual bloom ; her eyebrows were undarkened, and her hair hung in uncurled wisps over her forehead. Thus taken by storm, as it were, the Baroness felt herself decidedly at a disadvantage. She seized a lace shawl that lay beside her and flung it over her dishevelled head ; then sat up and glanced at her son with no very well-pleased expression of countenance.

“What do you want ?” she asked crossly. “I do wish that you would be considerate, Gaston. Sit down and don’t look larger than you can help. Your height is quite startling.”

Gaston’s face was very pale. There were lines on his forehead and beneath his eyes ; his mother, in glancing at him, thought that she had discerned a touch of gray in his black moustache and cropped dark locks. A momentary misgiving seized her, but she vanquished it with a little laugh.

“You look tragic,” she said boldly. “What is the matter now ? Has Lancelot eloped with Olivia ? He is just the romantic boy who would do it.”

“Have you not heard ?” said her son. “He has left Richard Hervey’s house, and no one knows whither he has gone. Mother, what did *you* know of his history ?”

"I?" said Madame Waldstein, lifting her eyebrows. "What you and Richard were pleased to tell me, of course; no more."

"What *I* told you," said Gaston, a deep red flushing his brow, "was a mere guess on my part, derived from a hint of that scoundrel Mitchell, Hervey's agent in Mickleham, who spoke as if he knew all about the matter. Hervey knew, though I did not, that this boy was Lucy's son, whom I thought dead."

"Lucy Moore's son? Oh, I knew that! But the father——"

"Lucy was my wife," Gaston interrupted her sternly. "The boy Bertram—Lancelot as you have been in the habit of calling him—is my son."

"Your wife? Really. Why did you never announce that fact to us before?"

"You knew it," said Gaston, in a tone which, though fierce, was little above a whisper. "You knew that Lucy was my wife. You never denied it when you spoke to me on the subject."

"Well," said the Baroness, beginning to fan herself negligently, "I certainly acknowledge that you always called her your wife in conversation; but my impression was that there had been a little informality as regarded the marriage ceremony; that, in fact, you left yourself a loophole of escape."

"You thought that I was an utter villain, in short?"

"Nothing of the kind. My dear Gaston, you have not brains enough to be a villain," said his mother, recovering her self-possession all the more completely because she fancied him likely to lose his own. "If you had been a little cleverer, there would never have been all this absurd mystery. I thought that you had treated the girl rather shabbily, and Hervey thought so too; but I concluded that the deception made matters comfortable between you——"

"Was there a single moment after hearing of her death," said Gaston vehemently, "when I kept you in ignorance of her relation to me?"

"You said very little about her, as a matter of fact, Gaston. I broke the news of her death to you as gently as I could, because I knew that you had been fond of her; and you fainted away at my feet—like a girl," said Madame Waldstein contemptuously, "upon hearing it. I never asked, and you never gave me any formal explanation. The subject seemed to be painful to you, and we avoided it."

"I spoke to you of her as my wife; I told you to let the world know. I thought every one knew."

"I differed from you on that point," said his mother with perfect composure. "I considered it better that the world should know nothing about it. If you had disclosures to make, you should have made them yourself."

Gaston was silent for a moment. "I told you to send a proper announcement of my wife's death to the daily papers; did you do that?"

"No, I did not."

"I spoke of her to Felicia, I believe—to the doctor and others—as my wife—how did you explain that to them?"

"I told them what I thought: that you were either labouring under a delusion, or that you did it for appearances' sake."

"And yet you knew that that was not the case."

"Certainly not: I knew nothing of the kind. I believed all the statements that I made," said the Baroness, with a cool air of conscious rectitude. "She was dead, and there was no need for us to make ourselves the nine days' wonder of the county about her, thank Heaven! I certainly expected that when you recovered from your illness you would make a great deal more fuss about the matter than you did. I believe you would if she had been your wife. Your

silence proved to me what I always thought: that you were ashamed of the connection, and wished to bury it in oblivion."

"Could you not see that I was silent because her death was a great shock and grief to me?"

"Silence is a very inexplicable thing," said his mother. "If you had put up a monument to your wife and child in Netherby Church I might have believed in your marriage. At present there is a miserable little stone in the churchyard, with the word 'Lucy,' and a date upon it—that is all."

"I went abroad as soon as possible, without thinking of those details," returned Gaston rather sadly. "You yourself remind me of the other matter that I have against you. Why did you tell me that my son was dead?"

"Was not your son dead? Is it not your son that is buried with Lucy in the churchyard here?"

"Is it not true," said her son sternly, "that you sent Richard Hervey to Hester Rowe's cottage with instructions to take my boy Bertram to the Mickleham Workhouse?"

"Certainly not. I gave no instructions to anybody."

"We need not wrangle over words. You know what I mean. You know that you have

separated me from my son for fifteen years. You and Hervey have both been aware that the boy at Netherby Manor was *my* son—*my* Bertram; and you have left me ignorant all these years. Hervey I can to some extent excuse; he was deceived; but you—say what you like, but you knew that Lucy was my wife, and that Bertram was my lawful son; and knowing this, *why* did you practise this monstrous deception on me?"

"You ask a foolish question," said Madame Waldstein, looking at him steadily, "and one which I decline to answer."

"But you must answer me," said Gaston with equal steadiness of gaze, "and you shall."

Madame Waldstein's eyes fell. She toyed with her fan: for a moment a look of indecision passed over her face.

"Do you think," she said, "supposing that I *had* known of your marriage, that I would not have moved heaven and earth to prevent Lucy Moore's son from succeeding to my son Philip's inheritance? Or if Olivia had been a boy, do you think that I should have cared whether you married Lucy Moore or not? Supposing—which I don't acknowledge—that I had known the true story all along, do you think I should not have speculated on the possibility of your casting your

life away in some wild expedition in the East, or even of putting an end to it deliberately in your first paroxysms of rage and grief, and thus leaving the way free for Olivia after all? Did all this in your wisdom never occur to you?"

"No," said Gaston slowly. "It never did. The thought would have been too hideous——"

"To occur to your innocent mind. *Tant mieux*. Then suppose we drop the subject, Gaston. I do not see why we should recall these old memories: they are neither entertaining nor profitable."

"I have not finished with them yet," Ravenscroft answered, with a darker look than ever. "I have something to show you. To-day I have learned—what I never understood before—the reason of her anxiety, her jealousy, her causeless distrust of me, poor child! I find that she received anonymous letters, which insinuated all sorts of suspicions into her mind. This is one of them: I hold it in my hand, you see. Have you any reason to guess whence these anonymous letters came?"

As he spoke he spread before her eyes the letter which Lucy had received on the day of her departure from Elmstone.

Madame Waldstein shook her head. "I know

nothing," she said, pushing away the paper. "Why should I know anything about it?"

"I cannot tell. I cannot believe that you do. I should find it hard to believe," said Gaston, dropping his head with something of a sigh, "that it was my mother who poisoned our lives, and broke her heart—and mine."

"Your heart! Pooh! your heart is not broken at all," said the Baroness, averting her eyes from the sight of his face, and taking up her smelling-salts. "You have got over it, as we do get over our love troubles in course of time. After all, the abrupt conclusion of your married life may have been for the best. I do not think that even you would have expected me to receive my former maid on an equal footing in my own drawing-room."

"My wife would have been the equal of any one in England for beauty and goodness!" cried Gaston fiercely. "If only I could find the person who made her believe me such a brute, such a villain, as to have deceived her!—oh, it is horrible to think that her last moments should have been embittered by a doubt of my truth to her!—" and he struck the wall against which he had been leaning with his clenched fist, as though unconscious of what he did.

The Baroness quailed a little. She watched him furtively for some moments, and twisted her fan between her fingers with a nervous motion of the hands. She moved it rapidly backwards and forwards, and laid it over her lips as if to conceal their expression as Gaston turned to her and spoke. His face was deeply flushed: the veins upon his forehead swelled and throbbed as he proceeded; but by a great and evident effort he made his voice tolerably calm. Husky indeed it was, and unsteady, but free from the passion of which even his mother stood sometimes in awe.

“I must say what I shall never be able to forget if I do not say it now,” he began. “Mother, you once dropped a word which has haunted me ever since: ‘what if I had been deceived all along?’ you said. I *have* been deceived, I find, most cruelly deceived; what made you use that expression, mother, if you knew nothing of my story? Surely *you* could not tell me who was the person that poisoned her mind with foul suspicions, and led her to think of me as if I had been her deadliest enemy? Who did this, mother? If you know, tell me for Heaven’s sake, and I will try——” he stopped and almost choked in uttering the words—“I will try—to forgive you—for what you have done.”

There was a pause. Madame Waldstein's face was very pale, but there was a strange glitter in her eyes. She looked half afraid to speak, and half contemptuous of her own fear and of Gaston's passionate appeal. Something in her silence or in her face caused her son to cast his self-control to the winds.

"You do know!" he thundered, suddenly advancing towards her with a threatening gesture which caused her to shrink back a little—although, in truth, he meant no harm to her by that gesture, and never knew that he had made it—"you know, and you have known all along! You shall speak now. I *will* hear the truth—at last. Who wrote those letters?"

But Madame Waldstein's spirit was equal to his own. "What if I do know?" she cried in a shrill excited voice. "What if you do hear the truth? What can you do to me? You look as if you could kill me—do if you dare. Yes, I knew all about it—it was I who pulled the wires all the time, to make you play, you pair of puppets, with your stupid show of love-making and happiness! Do you think that *I* would have received Lucy Moore in *my* house and seen Lucy Moore's son inherit Philip's lands and stand in Philip's place? As long as you were the younger son I

let you alone: when Philip was likely to die, I separated you; and I wish the boy had died with her. Do I know who wrote the letters? Yes, I myself—I wrote the letters which made her believe that she was not your wife. But for Richard Hervey's sickening folly you would never have heard that story or seen your boy again. And now what are you going to do? Assault me? strike me? murder me?—a woman and your mother? Advance one step nearer and I will ring the alarum-bell and rouse the neighbourhood.”

She need not have added those last sentences. Gaston stood as if turned to stone by her confession. His hand was still slightly uplifted and clenched: he looked as if he had neither the power nor the will to move it. His face was gray with a pallor more terrible than even the ghastliness of death. Madame Waldstein, undaunted and unscrupulous as her nature was, shivered as she met the look of mingled horror and aversion in her son's blanched face.

He stood confronting her, without a word. After a time he lowered his head and let his hand fall to his side. “My God!” he said, without looking up; “and yet you are a woman!” He turned away, caught at a heavy piece of furniture

for support, and buried his face in his hands. Strong man though he was, he trembled in every limb.

The Baroness watched him as if fascinated by the spectacle of his suffering. It frightened her more than his previous violence had done. She dared not speak, and yet she longed for the silence to be broken. But how would he break it?

He lifted his face at last and glanced at her. "I should not have thought it possible," he said with broken and difficult utterance, "that you, even though you hated me, could be guilty of such a crime! I wonder that you dare tell me this story. You must know that if it had been any one but you—any one but my mother— But it is no use speaking about it," he broke off abruptly, letting his voice sink so low that she could scarcely hear the words. "I can do nothing—say nothing more: I can but leave you to your own conscience—if you have one—and to God's justice—if there be any justice anywhere. One thing only I can do—I will never enter this house again whilst you remain in it. You have spoilt three lives—the guilt of that will lie upon your head, but you shall never see me here again."

He quitted the room quietly enough, but when

Alice went back to it she found her mistress lying insensible upon her couch. She was recovered from her swoon with some difficulty, but she made light of it to Felicia, and never revealed the cause of her agitation. Gaston's words were not, however, to be lightly heard nor easily forgotten.





CHAPTER XXXIII.

MISSING.

RAVENS-CROFT spent the night at the village inn. In the morning he sent a note to Mrs. Ravens-croft, desiring her and Olivia to meet him at the railway-station at a certain hour—not to accompany him, he added, but to hear something that he had to say before he went to London.

The two women obeyed his bidding with some wonder. As yet they knew nothing of what had passed: perhaps they knew less than any other two persons in Netherby, for the news of Gaston's visit to Netherby Manor, and of Mr. Hervey's agitation at Lance's flight, had flown like wildfire about the village. When they reached the station they found him standing on the platform with Vera at his side.

He hardly raised his eyes as they drew near.

Olivia held aloof: her face bore traces of tears and sleeplessness. But these were as nothing compared with the haggard look of trouble upon her uncle's face. He looked ten years older than when she saw him last.

"Come in here," he said, opening the door of the one little waiting-room, which he had taken care should be empty. "This is an odd place to meet in, but I had not time to find a better. I am sorry to have made you come so far. Felicia, has Madame Waldstein told you anything of her conversation with me yesterday?"

"Nothing, Gaston."

"And Vera has told you nothing. Well, I must let you know the facts as quickly as possible. Come forward, Olivia, they concern you. I could not meet you at the Hall, because, as long as my mother lives, I shall never cross the threshold of her house again. It does not signify why: that is the fact."

He paused, glanced at Vera and at Olivia. Then he looked down and resumed in a dry tone, as if he were repeating a lesson learned by rote. "I find that I have made a mistake, Olivia—I withdraw my opposition to your engagement."

"What, Uncle Gaston?" Olivia could find no other ejaculation by which to express her

astonishment. She thought that she must have misunderstood him.

"I withdraw my opposition," said Ravenscroft distinctly. "When we have found him—Lancelot—you may marry him as soon as he is of age, as far as I am concerned." He shot an impatient glance at Vera. "I shall have to leave the rest of the story to you, I think," he said. "I can't tell it. The air of this room is suffocating. It stifles me!"

He flung open the window and leaned out. Mrs. Ravenscroft looked at Olivia in consternation. There was a moment's pause: then he turned round again and spoke.

"I must go through with it, I suppose, now that I have begun. Some years ago, Felicia, I married—you have heard the story of Lucy Moore, no doubt—I married and had a son. This son, I was told, died while away from home, when he was not four years old; I now find that he was not dead: I was deceived. He was stolen away from me and brought up under another name by persons who did not scruple to cheat and trick me. Richard Hervey knew—Madame Waldstein knew—I alone did *not* know until yesterday that Lancelot Aylmer was my own son, Bertram Ravenscroft."

Felicia made some exclamation of surprise. Gaston turned upon her sharply.

"*You* at least did not know it? *You* did not share in my mother's plots? You know now for the first time why she wished for a marriage between my son and your daughter? It would have made matters straight so very easily!"

"You need not insult my mother by those questions, sir," said Olivia's young impetuous voice. "You know that she was as ignorant as myself." Then she eyed him with haughty indignation. "*You* Lance's father?" she said hotly. "You who have hated and thwarted him ever since you came back to England! I don't—I can't—believe it."

She turned her back upon him. Felicia would have remonstrated, but Gaston only smiled.

"Let her go on," he said. "It does her good. What else have you to say, Olivia?"

"I will say this," answered Olivia, "that I am exceedingly sorry for Lance, and that there is no one in the world whom he would not sooner have chosen for his father than yourself. My poor Lance!" She ended by hiding her face on her mother's shoulder and bursting into passionate tears.

"You are hard to please," said her uncle coldly. "I refused my consent to your engagement yesterday : do I refuse it to-day ? You are a foolish child. What more do you want me to do or say ?"

"I want you to regret the injustice that you have done him," said Olivia, lifting her face and hastily drying her eyes. "You know well enough, Uncle Gaston, that you have been unkind and unjust to him in every way."

Vera, looking into Gaston's face, and reading pain in every line of it, opened her mouth to rebuke the girl's keen-edged words. But Gaston silenced her by a glance.

"If I feel any such regret, it is to my son and not to you that I shall express it, Olivia. I am now on my way to London : I hope to bring him back with me in a few days at furthest. Then perhaps you will give me credit for better motives."

"Olivia, your uncle is very generous," urged Felicia.

"Oh no, mamma," was the girl's prompt reply. "He is only repairing an injustice."

"Quite right," said Gaston. "It is all that I wish you to say, Olivia. Let me mention one thing to you both : I do not wish Bertram's story

to be talked about more than is inevitable. I wish you not to write accounts of it to your friends, Olivia. Above all, I caution you not to trust your friend the Countess Zaranoff. Perhaps you will be less inclined to do so when I tell you that it was she who told me the night before last where I should find you, and what you were likely to be doing. I have put you on your guard. Now I must go; I hear my train. Good-bye, Felicia: I may tell the boy that you will be glad to see him, I presume?"

The whistle of the approaching train was heard; the station-bell rang loudly. Gaston turned aside from Olivia, who stood immovable at her mother's side, with lips compressed and hands tightly grasping her pocket-handkerchief, and took Vera's hands in his.

"My dear," he said, "I shall soon come back. Don't forget me, Vera, and don't forget my claim. When I have found my son, I shall come to you for help in the task that I have made so difficult for myself. I *know* you'll help me."

He said the last words very hurriedly, then bent and kissed her forehead before he hastened away. Vera had no time to protest.

He had singularly few doubts as to the suc-

cess of his search for Lancelot. He placed himself in communication with the detective police-force ; the superintendent assured him that a lonely lad of Lancelot's age, appearance, and education, was sure to be discovered in a few days. And yet day by day went by, and nothing was heard of him.

Advertisements were inserted in the newspapers ; a reward was offered ; a description printed ; but in vain. Scores of boys and young men presented themselves, some calling themselves by the names or initials under which he had been advertised, but nothing of the real Lancelot Aylmer could be seen or heard. The boy had disappeared as utterly as if he had vanished from off the face of the earth.

Mr. Hervey now figured as the aggrieved party. He had received Gaston's son, he said, into his own house because he was apparently destitute, and he had done the best that he could for the friendless, nameless boy ; it was not his fault that he had never heard of Gaston's marriage with Lucy Moore. If Madame Waldstein had known of any such marriage, she ought to have informed him of it. At which remark Madame Waldstein merely shrugged her shoulders, and intimated to her friends that she had known no

more than Richard Hervey himself had known, and that no blame could possibly be attached to her.

But, as days and weeks passed on, and brought no tidings of the boy, affairs took a sombre aspect. Madame Waldstein grew silent: Mr. Hervey uneasy and anxious. Olivia's bearing became less proud, her eyes more wistful than of old. And Gaston—ah, there was the greatest change of all—Gaston began to look old and haggard; the frown was seldom absent from his brow nor the brooding sadness from his eyes; not seldom he seemed completely worn out by his incessant journeyings from one end of the kingdom to the other, by the sudden alternations of hope and fear, when by chance he heard of some new-comer to a far-distant town or village who bore a faint resemblance to the brown-eyed lad whom his own words had goaded into flight from the only home that held him dear.

When September was over Vera left Netherby, and returned to her house in London. Mr. Hervey greatly opposed this step, but Vera, sorry as she was to leave him, thought it wiser to let him know that she could not always stay with him. She promised to return at Christmas, and with this promise he had to be content.

She had refused to go to St. Petersburg. She could not consent to separate herself for so long a time from her friends in England. She was anxious to see Lancelot once more, and to know that he was safe at home. She trusted that when he was found, Gaston's bitterness of soul would pass away, that he would learn to love his son and to forgive the mother who had wronged him. She saw little of him at present, this search for Lancelot left him small time for visits even to her. But when he saw her, he never failed, to her extreme distress and confusion, to remind her of the claim that he believed himself to possess upon her pity and affection.

Maurice Zaranoff had left Mickleham very soon after Lancelot's flight. Frank Longmore took him away to Scotland almost against his will, and there he recovered strength and spirit every day in the fresh, free mountain air. It was November before he returned to London with his friend and presented himself to Vera.

Frank Longmore escorted his mother and Madame Zaranoff one December night to a performance at the Lyceum. They did not leave the theatre until long after eleven o'clock, when rain was falling, and a good deal of delay occurred in reaching their carriage and getting out

of Wellington Street. Even after they had started, one or two pauses took place. It was during one of these pauses that Ilma was suddenly heard to utter a slight stifled cry. She leaned forward and touched Longmore's knee with her hand, without attracting the notice of Lady Longmore or her daughter. Frank looked at her, then turned towards the window which she had silently indicated. He was just in time to see Maurice Zaranoff on the pavement, evidently parting from some one inside a carriage. Frank could not see the person to whom he spoke, but he fancied that Ilma saw.

"Who was it?" said Jessie Longmore, catching the intent expression in his eyes.

It was Ilma who made answer. "The singer, Mademoiselle de Lusignan," she said. Then she leaned back and passed the remainder of the drive in cold and gloomy silence. As she had hitherto been the gayest of the gay little party, the change was striking. Frank thought it ominous—though of what he could not tell.

He was startled when she bent forward to bid him farewell, and the light of the lamps fell full upon her face. There was an unnatural spot of colour on her cheeks, but her lips were pale, and her eyes wore an angry look. She

scarcely spoke, and the ungloved hand that she tendered to her friends before the carriage took her to her own house was cold as ice.

Frank Longmore was perplexed. "I never saw so sudden a change from sunshine to storm," he said. "Did she not like to see Maurice with another woman? My father thought she was glad of her release; but her face told a different story—and so did her passionate interest in his movements at Netherby. I wish Maurice well out of the business, for I think it's very plain that Vera de Lusignan will marry him as soon as he asks her; and I rather wonder that he has delayed asking her so long. I'll tell him so to-morrow."





PART V.—LOVE AND HATE.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A MAN'S LOVE.

It was December. A cold and pitiless wind was blowing. A steady soaking rain, mingled with sleet, had fallen from three o'clock in the afternoon until half-past seven in the evening, and at half-past seven there was not the least apparent chance of its coming to an end. Maurice Zaranoff, as he strode hastily along the London streets with his coat-collar turned up to his ears, assured himself that English cold was nothing to Russian cold, but shivered in spite of this assurance. The night was chilly and unpleasant, and there was nothing to be said in its favour.

He hastened through many small and narrow streets in the East End, until he found himself before a red-brick building, brightly lighted with

gas-lamps, and bearing an indefinite outside resemblance to a public-house. A few men and lads were loitering about the open door. On a large coloured lamp over the doorway could be read the name of the place: "The Albert Coffee Tavern." Two or three large placards were fastened upon the walls and on the door: as Maurice took shelter from the rain he began to read the announcements on them with some interest. He listened also to the talk that went on amongst the men and boys around him. There was a violent dispute going on as to whether sixpence was too high a price to pay for seats at an entertainment about to be given that night in the Albert Coffee Tavern.

"'Taint worth paying for, I tell you," said a recusant. "'Tis this 'un with a fiddle and 't'other with a pianny, and not a good honest rousing song as I'd give a ha'penny for. Nor a pot of beer neither. I'm going round to the 'Blue Boar,' I am. Come along."

But, to the credit of his friends be it spoken, this invitation met with an indignant refusal.

"What *I* think," said a pale lad with an intelligent face and bright eyes, "is this, that these gentlemen and ladies put themselves out for us to bring us a little pleasure, and we ought

to thank 'em, and not stand out for a penny or two. They don't put it in their pockets: it goes to keeping up of this place, you know. So we get the benefit."

"If you call it a benefit," said the man, moving slowly off. Here Maurice turned round.

"I should call it a benefit," he said to the boy, in the cool clear tones which could be heard farther than many a louder voice, "to hear for sixpence a singer whom gentlemen and ladies give guineas night after night to hear. It's not often that either you or I have a chance of hearing any one like Mademoiselle de Lusignan."

He pointed to a name on the placard, and succeeded in detaining the would-be runaway to listen. "Who's she?" he said sulkily. But others were not so ignorant. "She sings well, don't she?" said one man, coming round to look at the name. "I've heard tell of her. What does she do coming here, I wonder."

"Gets well paid, I'll warrant," said the grumbler.

"I'll tell you why she comes," said Maurice. "She comes because she is sorry for the dull hard-working lives many of you lead, and she wants to do all she can to give you a little brightness and pleasantness. I have heard her

say that she was once poor herself, and knew what it was to hunger for bread, and meet with injustice and cruelty. She would be sorry if you did not come and hear her to-night," he added, turning especially to the man who had murmured at the cost. "I think you will enjoy it more than your glass of beer."

"Are you a friend of hers, sir?" said the boy with keen interest. The man meanwhile read the placard with a surly hesitating air.

"I am an acquaintance—hardly a friend," said Maurice. Whereat the boy looked at him with a sort of reverent awe, and the men drew together, eyed him curiously, and were silent.

At this moment a carriage drove up to the door, and two ladies—a young and an old one—got out. Maurice made a step forward as if to assist them, but his help was unnecessary: secretary, manager, friends, came pouring out of some inner office to welcome the charitable young vocalist who had promised them her help for that evening's entertainment, simply out of kindness, and not in the least from love of applause or notoriety. The concert had not even been widely advertised: it was given for the benefit of the working men and women of the neighbourhood, and they were not likely to

appreciate the fact that Vera de Lusignan was considered a remarkable singer. And if any one wants to know how Vera became aware that there was any such place in the East End requiring help, it must be answered that Maurice Zaranoff had found it out and told her.

Maurice Zaranoff himself, now living quietly on the income afforded him by the small estate which remained unconfiscated on account of its position across the frontier, had of late occupied himself chiefly with two objects. One was literature, and the other a minute inquiry into the condition of the working classes in London. He went about slums and alleys as if he had been to the manner born : not for the sake of charity, although he was never slow to help both with kindly words and alms when occasion offered, but because he wanted to learn for himself what were the essential differences between Russian moujiks and English working men, between a nation that cowered beneath an iron despotism, and one which had raised itself above oppression and won its way to be the noblest and the freest country in the world. Maurice Zaranoff found plenty of vice and crime and misery in the homes of the poor ; but he did find also a spirit of independence, a love of liberty, a rough sense

of justice that he acknowledged to himself could not be found in a Russian Commune, the home of the down-trodden moujik, laden with taxes and burdened with requirements which he did not understand.

When Maurice saw Vera de Lusignan stepping down from her carriage amongst a little crowd of "horny-handed sons of toil," the sweet singer with her heart full of compassion for the hard and weary lives which she wished so much to brighten, his mind went back involuntarily to the memory of the two women whom he had loved — both now numbered with the dead. There was his mother, a gracious stately lady, who used to gather round her the serfs of his father's household (in the days when serfdom existed), teach them to read, to write, to sew, and talk to them and pray with them herself; not the only Russian lady of those days who looked upon her servants as her brethren. There was a woman of a very different type: the eager and passionate Pole, Anna Strolenski, with her ardent revolutionary aspirations, her terrible, beautiful devotion to her people's cause, her martyrdom at the last. And now he looked upon a third: no great lady, no fanatical enthusiast, but a woman of genius, strong, calm, and

thoughtful, who also said : "*I will not hold myself aloof from my brothers and my sisters because I am rich and they are poor : rather let me share my gifts with them, for they are my people and their God is also mine.*" Three nations had produced these three women, dissimilar in position and in temperament indeed, but alike in this that they held it true that God had created "of one flesh and blood all nations that are upon the earth."

Maurice kept himself in the background as he followed the singer and her companions into the large hall which was used as a concert-room. He sat in a quiet corner, and watched the proceedings of the performers and the audience with observant sympathetic eyes. It pleased him to see that some of the men had come in their everyday suits, and that the careworn mothers in the twopenny benches had brought their babies with them under cover of shawls and tattered umbrellas. He was not offended by the proximity of giggling shop-girls and supercilious young salesmen ; but he was more interested by a very grimy old cobbler in the greasiest of suits, who beat time to the music, and said, "Eh, mon ! but it's like listening to the angels !" at the end of Vera de Lusignan's

first song. Maurice would gladly have shaken hands with him there and then.

He looked up at Vera when she began to sing, and wondered why she was so beautiful. Her face was not perfect, and it was undeniably too pale; but it possessed that harmony of tint and line, that indefinable haunting charm which lovelier women sometimes miss. Those sweet dark eyes, with their slight touch of melancholy, those curved and drooping lips, that still figure with the folded hands; were there ever eyes and lips that would seem to him so sweet? was there anywhere in all the world a figure that would haunt his dreams as hers had lately done?

He turned aside and shaded his eyes with his hand, leaning his elbow upon the back of the bench as he did so, as if to keep that vision from his sight while he listened to her exquisitely pathetic voice.

For the great characteristic of Vera's voice was this pathetic quality: a melting, searching tenderness that easily touched the springs of tears.

She sang the two ballads for which her name was down upon the programme; then came an *encore*. What would she sing now? Ah! something that Maurice had heard before:

“My heart it is sore and the cold wind is driving,
In the grave with my mother I would that I lay;
To be done with the hunger, the toil, and the striving,
The comfortless night and the desolate day.”

Maurice looked instinctively towards his friend the cobbler. The man's face was turned to the platform still, but two great tears were making their way down those rugged grimy cheeks. He forgot to conceal them, forgot even to wipe them away until the singer's voice sank into silence at the end of the last line :

“And there with the angels and you be at rest.”

Then he rose to his feet. “That's eno' for ae nicht,” Maurice heard him mutter, rubbing the salt drops out of his bleared old eyes. “I'll nae bide. I'll just hear naught to beat *that* if I stay till the New Year's in, I reckon.”

And he went away, although he had not had his full twopenny-worth : a great tribute to a great singer's powers—for the cobbler was a Scotchman.

The concert was over at half-past ten, and the audience was dispersing when Vera came out. She had to pass through the hall itself before she could reach the door, and Maurice watched her approach as if it formed part of a scene in a play. At the door of an inner room,

which had been appropriated to the performers, she stood for an instant, talking to the secretary of the institution, with a bright interested look on her face. Then she drew her fur-lined cloak over her shoulders, and fastened it with great chased silver clasps at her throat. Her dress was of black velvet—she had chosen to dress carefully for the occasion—with fine white lace at neck and wrists, and silver ornaments. There were purple and white violets in her hair and on her bosom. The gaslight fell from above full upon her fair head, and tipped with gold the short curling hairs which always stood up around her brow like a coronal, in spite of Vera's efforts to make them lie in straight and decorous order. She looked very happy, very sweet; and yet there was something about her at that moment which sent a pang to Maurice Zaranoff's heart. What would be the fate of this fair and beautiful girl, he asked himself, with the tender hopeful light in her smiling eyes, and the radiance of womanly sympathy on her face? She was a creature so full of delicate instincts, of quick and generous impulses, of almost impossibly high aims, that she needed, of all things, a wise and protecting love, a guiding hand, a strong arm, in order that she might not wreck her whole life

by the fulfilment of some mistaken so-called duty. It seemed to Zaranoff that a possibility of this kind was already dimly foreshadowing itself; and he wished with his whole heart and soul that he had the power and the right to avert it. Had he the power?—he believed so. Had he the right? That was the question which he had never dared to ask himself, and which in that moment he vowed that he would never ask of her.

He drew back, meaning to let her pass him without seeking for a recognition, but when she was near him she quietly turned and held out her hand with a friendly smile.

“Why have you been sitting down here, Mr. Guyon?” she said. “It is very cold in this part of the hall. I saw you a long time ago, and tried to beckon you up to the platform, but you would not see me.”

“I heard you, mademoiselle. You gave us all great pleasure. And you touched the hearts of the people too; and that does good.”

“We drive past your lodgings,” said Vera. “Will you let us set you down there?” It was thus that she thanked him for his little speech.

They were at the door as she spoke, and, when she had taken leave of the coffee tavern authori-

ties, Vera stepped forward to the carriage in which Mrs. Cradock had already seated herself. It was then that a woman suddenly touched her and spoke.

“You don’t remember me, do you?” she said.

Vera turned and looked. The woman must have been between thirty and forty; she was dressed in flaunting colours, and the paint was thick upon her face; but the rouged cheeks were painfully thin, and the fierce dark eyes shone with a feverish light. One of the gentlemen interposed and tried to thrust her away, but Vera stopped him.

“One moment; let her speak please,” she said.

“I know the face—and yet——”

“You remember Julia Stanger, don’t you?”

Vera’s face turned pale and then flushed vividly. “Is it you?” she said. “O Julia, I am so sorry!”

“You needn’t be sorry,” said the woman.

“You needn’t take out your purse either. I heard you sing to-night—that’s all; and I remembered the night when I last heard you sing that song. Do you remember what you said to me then? Your words have come true, so you may think yourself avenged.”

“I should be sorry to think anything of the

sort. I am sorry I said what I did, Julia. Don't remember it any longer, and let me help you if I can."

Mrs. Cradock here began a nervous expostulation; Vera was standing on the doorstep still, bare-headed, in the cold and wet. The painted, over-dressed, bedraggled woman on the pavement, to whose miserable yet flaunting figure the girl's serious and gentle face was slightly bent, was the central point of the scene; the light fell full upon the two dissimilar heads, the bystanders and the carriage were in shadow. Maurice thought of some picture that he had seen in Germany, of a saint or angel relieving the distresses of the poor; there was no more repulsion or scorn in Vera's face than there had been in that of the pictured saint. Yet Vera was no saint; she could be cold and disdainful enough to vice when it came too near her—Maurice knew in what cloak of impenetrable reserve she held herself aloof from some of her professional companions; but now a softening sense of pity gave new tenderness to her eyes, new gentleness to the lines of her fair face.

"This is all that I wanted to say to you," said Julia, bringing her tawdry finery closer to Vera's pitying eyes. "I've come to a pretty pass

now, as you see, and my own sister won't speak to me—she's married and living away from the profession, quite the lady. And I don't suppose I shall last for very long ; so"—her voice sank almost into a whisper—"if you're as good as you look, tell me that you don't bear malice for the times when I used to bully you, for, as sure as I live, Vera Marlitt, if there *is* a God in heaven, He has punished me for all I ever did to you !"

"Don't talk in that way, Julia. I am very sorry that I said those foolish, wicked words. But I was only a child then—forgive me and let me help you," and Vera pressed her purse into her old companion's hands.

"Forgive *you* ? that's a good 'un," said Julia, recovering something of the brazen audacity of her old days. "You're a good soul and you always were, Vera—and—as for your money——" She held the purse in her hand and looked at it as if considering whether she should give it back, while a curious look of greed and hunger came over her pinched face. "Well," she said at last, "I'll keep it in memory of you, and because—because——" Again she hesitated, and the tears rushed into her handsome hollow eyes. "God bless you !" she said with a sudden hysteri-

cal sob. "I haven't tasted food since yesterday."

She burst into tears, threw off Vera's detaining hand and fled away in the darkness of the streets.

"Follow her! follow her!" said Vera quickly. "Oh—will nobody go and find her——"

She looked at Maurice. In a moment he had started in pursuit, but he speedily saw that pursuit would be all in vain. Julia Stanger had vanished down one of the dark side-streets, whither it would be useless and even dangerous to follow. He had to return and explain this to Vera, who mournfully acquiesced in the wisdom of his decision. "If only I could help her!" she repeated, forgetting utterly how great had been her detestation of Julia in olden days.

Maurice took his seat opposite her, and as the carriage passed under a gas-lamp he saw that there was a tear upon one delicate cheek. Involuntarily he leaned forward and spoke.

"I will find her. I do not think it will be difficult."

She lifted her eyes and thanked him gently. But she said nothing more.

The bunch of violets in her dress had fallen into her lap. Her fingers toyed with it from

time to time. Maurice watched the movements of the white hand with a sort of fascination. He could not see her face, for she had drawn back into the darkness.

The carriage stopped at the street in which he lived. He held out his hand as he bade her good-bye. Mrs. Cradock saw nothing but a quiet meeting of the fingers—and yet there was something more. When he left the carriage, Vera's violets were hidden in his hand. And at that moment of parting he had looked into Vera's eyes and they had spoken as they had never spoken before. He was not vain, but he did not think that Vera would have let her eyes rest with that lingering tenderness upon a man whom she did not love. At this consciousness his heart beat loud and fast, and the blood rushed to his brow. What had he done? Had he won Vera's heart? And if he had, would not its possession give to his life all the beauty, all the completeness, that of late it had somewhat lacked?

He had never told her his real name and history. Since her return to London late on in October they had met but little; and it must be confessed that Maurice had a touch of the constitutional indolence of the Russian nature, and had shrunk from a disclosure which it would

certainly pain him to make, and which when made might lead him on to say what she perhaps would never pardon—that he loved her. But now, if she loved him too, should he not tell her all?

For, as he well knew, he had nothing to offer her. He was poor, in exile and in disrepute; his name was branded as that of a traitor, his hand stained, though unintentionally, with innocent blood. How could he ask her to share his poverty and his disgrace?

And yet—if Vera loved him, would she not love him for himself and not for what he could give? It would have lowered his ideal of her if for a moment he could conceive the possibility of Vera's rejecting him on account of his circumstances. If she loved him—what a blessed possibility was that!—he would be wronging her not to tell her that he loved her too.

At any rate he resolved now to tell her all—his name, his history, his position and—last of all—his love. Would she banish him from her presence and tell him never to see her more? As he raised the violets to his lips, he said to himself that he thought not. For he trusted her as he had trusted no woman since the days when his mother had been to him the embodiment of all that was good and pure and true.



CHAPTER XXXV.

A WOMAN'S LOVE.

A SIMILAR train of thought was passing through Vera's mind. After Maurice's farewell she awoke, perhaps for the first time, to full consciousness of the meaning of her own feelings and, as she thought, of his looks and words. Ah, there was no mistake about it now. Maurice loved her: never else would he have drawn away her violets and held her hand in such a gentle clasp, or looked into her eyes with that strange new tenderness of expression which she had never seen since the day of her visit to him at Mickleham. Motionless as she sat in her corner of the carriage, her pulses were throbbing, her veins tingling with emotion as she recalled his look, his touch. She dared now to acknowledge what she had tried, ever since the days at Mickleham, to disguise from herself, that there was no man

in all the world who was half so dear to her as this unknown, nameless exile ; this adventurer, as the world called him ; this man without family, without prospects, and with a history which as yet she had not heard.

But she trusted him. She was sure that disgrace and exile were undeserved misfortunes ; she was prepared to hear the story, which some day he would tell her, of political error and failure—easy to be forgiven because it would prove him of nobler aims than other men. She had been reading books about Russia ; she had already heard many details respecting Polish, Nihilist, insurrectionary plots ; if Maurice had been concerned in one of these, she should trust him not one whit the less—because she loved him.

She was almost afraid to feel how much she loved him—how little had all other considerations but that of love become to her. Any sacrifice would be light if made for his sake ; any toil should be gladly undergone. She was proud to think that for once the usual positions of man and wife might be reversed : that she might be the breadwinner and the worker of the two. Although, she added to herself, with a quick pressure of her hands together, if *he* wished her

to leave her profession she would leave it; she would go where he wished, live as he lived, do what he liked and nothing more. Her identity should be swallowed up in his. What was fame to a woman who had all her life desired nothing so much as the sacred ties of love and home? Fame was a great thing; music was greater still; love was best.

It would be a sacrifice to give up her profession even for love and for Maurice's sake; but she could make it. She did hope that he would let her continue her present mode of life; it suited her, and she did not believe that she should be happy if she could not exercise her musical powers. But he knew best. He would know—he would understand. If he loved her she could afford to be generous; his love was a gift for which she would gladly barter all the world—“*the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them.*”

She was startled at the intensity of her own feelings. She had thought that her love was in its infancy and could be strangled like a small poisonous thing whenever she desired; but now, without her consent or knowledge, it had grown into a giant creature that enwrapped her whole being in its folds. Before long she delighted in

its strength. Nothing makes a woman prouder than the first discovery of her power to love; she is often as much in love with love as with the avowed object of that love. Her nature has asserted itself, and she acknowledges its royalty.

She could not sleep for happiness. Life was so beautiful that she hated to lose consciousness in sleep: no dream could be more beautiful than the waking reality. What was she that such happiness should come upon her? For she not only loved—love was in itself a poignant bliss, akin to pain, but she was loved (she was almost certain that she was loved) in return. When would the day dawn? the day that was to bring back to her the sight of that face, every lineament of which was dear?

In later days she recalled this impatience for the morrow with a sort of horror and amaze. Never in all her life would she again long for the coming day as she did then without a doubt and without a fear. Ever afterward, in the full course of joy, she would dread some unforeseen disaster, some little cloud in the horizon of which she had not dreamt—at first no bigger than a man's hand, but soon to cover the whole heaven of her life. Just now she was blind and deaf to

all but the future, apparently as bright and as serene as any summer's day.

She came downstairs next morning in a dress which she usually reserved for gala days. It was dark green, with buttons and waist-belt of oxidised silver. A little bunch of violets was fastened into her belt. She was slightly flushed, and, in spite of her almost sleepless night, her eyes were very bright.

"You are not tired, then, Vera?" said Mrs. Cradock, regarding her. "I was afraid that last night's expedition might fatigue you. But you look well."

"I am very well and not at all tired, auntie. There is a rehearsal this morning. Then I shall drive back as quickly as I can."

"Do you expect visitors, my dear, when you come back?"

"Yes, auntie. Or perhaps they will come before I go. But that is not likely."

She half expected Maurice to appear very early that morning. He knew at what hour she generally went out; he might come before she went. For this reason she had donned her pretty dress, her silver ornaments, her bunch of violets; but the time went on, and still he did not come. She had to set out upon her drive into town with

a very faint feeling of disappointment in her heart.

She went through rehearsal as quickly as possible, and returned home with a beating heart. It was past noon when she reached Kensington.

“Has any one been?”

“Yes, miss; Mr. Guyon. He said he would call again.”

Vera turned away her face to hide the disappointment depicted thereupon. The maid continued—

“There is a lady, too, miss, waiting for you in the little drawing-room. She would not give me her name; she said you knew her.”

Vera was surprised. She collected herself, however, and, after a moment's pause, entered the room in which her unknown guest awaited her. She saw a lady in black, whose face was so closely veiled that recognition was impossible. But when the door was closed, the lady raised her veil, and then Vera saw that her visitor was Ilma, Countess Zaranoff.

She said her name by a sudden impulse of amaze, then tried to greet her in a more ordinary manner; but Ilma repelled the proffered hand, and turned upon her a face that showed

that something was terribly amiss. For the creamy tints of her complexion were merged in a strange pallor, and her yellow-brown eyes seemed to burn like fire. Vera looked at her in silent surprise, and waited to hear the reason of this unexpected visit.

Madame Zaranoff was not slow to speak. Her voice was husky, but her manner was calm and self-restrained. It was only her face that told its tale of excitement and of suffering; and there was one sure sign of agitation. She could not remember her English: twice or thrice she tried to speak it; and, before the sentence was finished, relapsed into French—the tongue to which she was most accustomed. Happily French was as familiar to Vera as German or English; and not a shade of meaning, not a turn of expression in Ilma's speech escaped her.

"Mademoiselle," began the Countess, "I come, believe me, with no unkind motive. I will not say what has made me resolve to tell you my story; you will see its object soon enough. Will you listen to me for one little moment?"

"As long as you please, madame. Will you not be seated?"

Madame Zaranoff sank into the chair which Vera gave her, but without a word of thanks.

Her hands and lips moved nervously ; her face was still very pale. "I must ask you to hear something of my earlier life. Forgive me for the intrusion of my private affairs upon you ; they have to do with you more than you imagine." She paused a little, biting her lips as if to moisten and redden them, and not looking Vera in the face ; then said suddenly : "You know Maurice Guyon ?"

"I do."

"You know that Guyon is not his name—at least that it is his Christian name merely ?"

"Madame——"

"He has not told you his own, naturally. It is left for me to enlighten you. Hush, let me speak."

Vera rose in great indignation. "Pardon me ; Mr. Guyon himself will tell me his secrets if he chooses——"

"He will not choose," said Ilma sharply. "He will *never* tell you his real name and station, if he has not told them to you already. Maurice Guyon—yes, he is that, indeed ; but he is also Count Zaranoff—and my husband."

Vera's face changed to stone. "What ?" she said with sudden emphasis. "He is—what ?"

"My husband," said Ilma steadily ; and then

the two women looked for the space of a minute or two into each other's faces, and were silent.

Vera was stricken to the very heart ; but her pride forbade her to show her pain. She had turned as white as Ilma herself, however, when at last the Countess spoke :

"Of course it is difficult for you to believe me. He kept his secret—and I kept the secret also—because—because we had quarrelled." She averted her face as she spoke, and the red spot of colour came out upon her cheeks. "He associated himself with conspirators ; it was said that he conspired also—I do not know. He was untrue to me,—I was sure of it,—and we separated in anger. I have had reason since then to think that I was mistaken, and that he never deceived me. If that were the case, then it was my doing that we were separated for a time—and I might hope—I might still dream of a reunion." She paused and then added with pitiless distinctness : "If no other woman came between us."

Vera, still standing by the table, shrank a little. "I would never be that woman," she said in a low clear tone.

"I thought not," said Ilma ; "I did not suspect *you*."

Again there was silence; then Vera spoke:

"If you did not suspect me," she said, "why did you come here to tell me this story?"

"Because I suspected *him*," said Madame Zarnoff passionately. "Because I knew how ready he was to admire a beautiful face—and yours is beautiful, doubly beautiful to him, perhaps, because it is so unlike my own. I know his love for music; I know the thousand ways in which he can be attracted and allured. When I met him at Netherby before he was taken ill—yes, we met in that plantation between the church and Madame Waldstein's house,—I told him that he was more changed to me than ever he had been before. 'Some woman has worked this change,' I said; but I did not know that that woman was Vera de Lusignan, the singer."

The bitterness of her accent called up no resentment into Vera's eyes. She answered calmly, but in a sunken voice which Ilma could scarcely hear.

"You may rest assured, madame, that I shall never again disturb the relations between you and—your—your husband. If I had known—if I had known——" she said, and there the words became inaudible altogether.

"I did not think you knew. I did not be-

lieve that you would have tried to take him from me. I was sure that he could not have told you all."

"Tell me more," said Vera with a visible effort. "He was exiled?"

"Exiled to Siberia."

"And you—you had quarrelled before he went? or else you would have accompanied him——ah!" She caught her breath quickly, and turned her white face to the half-frightened woman who had come to wreck her life and peace. It seemed to Ilma that she suddenly made herself taller and lowered her eyes upon her with a look of illimitable and majestic scorn. "Why did you not go with him in the hour of his sorrow and shame?" she said. "Where were *you*? It was your place to be at his side. He told me a story once of a man exiled to Siberia whose *promised*—ah yes, his *promised* wife, he said, refused to see him, sent him a cruel message that she would not share his disgrace—as if that message did not disgrace her sufficiently in the eyes of every generous woman and large-hearted man! Were you the woman of whom he spoke? Answer: I have a right to know."

"You have no right," said Ilma slowly; "but

I will answer your question. Yes, it was I who sent the message—and I thought that his conduct justified it.”

“You thought so? You were not even sure,” said Vera. The impetuous blood mounted to her cheeks and forehead as she proceeded. “I—though only the poor singer, Vera de Lusignan—I would have done better than that, madame. I would have known whether he was guilty before I sent him such a message. And,” she added in a low voice, “I will know now. I will take the warning. I will not condemn him unheard.”

“No,” said Ilma ironically, “hear by all means everything that he has to say. I should be curious to hear it too—curious to know how he denies the fact that he has a wife living, or how he will explain his silence on the point. But if you do listen to him, beware of listening too long. Remember that his wife’s place is taken. For your own sake I warn you, Vera de Lusignan. What! do you know nothing yet of the morals of a Russian noble that you look so outraged and indignant?”

“I know Maurice,” said Vera proudly, “and I know myself.”

“If you are so sure of both,” answered Ilma, rising, “I can have nothing more to say. But

are you sure that you know Maurice Zaranoff as well as you thought you knew Maurice Guyon ? ”

Vera was silent. Ilma came closer and laid her hand on the girl's arm. “ You trusted him ; I know I trusted him once, and he betrayed me. Let me save you from the same fate while there is time.”

“ He is your husband,” Vera breathed rather than spoke, with a mute appeal for mercy in her eyes.

“ My husband ? Yes ; the worse for me.”

“ Then—you do not love him ? ”

Again they confronted each other. Vera was trembling from head to foot ; Ilma was tranquil and composed, although the cruel vengeful look still spoilt the beauty of her eyes.

“ Love him ? ” she repeated very slowly. “ Why should you ask me that ? I suppose because you would like to console him for my coldness and my cruelty ? You shall not have that satisfaction. I will say to you what I have never said to him, that—in spite of the insulting indifference with which he has treated me, in spite of his falseness, his cruelty, and his abominable hard-heartedness—I have the weakness, as his wife, to love him still. Have I answered you ?

And now I will bid you farewell, for I have done my errand."

Thus abruptly she brought the conference to an end. Vera had sunk into a chair, but she rose and rang the bell for the maid. Countess Zaranoff lowered her veil and bowed coldly; Vera returned the salutation with mechanical courtesy. The front door opened and closed again. Then the girl dragged herself upstairs with slow and weary steps, and locked herself into her own room. She gave none admittance; she neither ate nor drank; she lay for some time with face and bosom pressed against the floor in dull deep agony too deep for words or tears. "Her husband," she repeated from time to time, "her husband? hers? Oh, cruel, cruel." And once with a sort of sob she cried upon his name. "Maurice! Maurice!" she said. "Oh, my love, my love!" And then, although she did not faint, a stupor of grief came over her, and for some time she knew nothing of the world around.

It was late in the afternoon when Mrs. Cradock came to her door. "Vera, will you not let me in?" she said. "Mr. Guyon is here and wishes to see you."

There was a little pause. Mrs. Cradock heard a movement in the room and knocked again.

Presently the door was opened, only an inch or two, and Vera's voice came through the opening. It sounded dull and strained, as if all the power and sweetness had gone out of it.

"Tell Mr. Guyon that—that I cannot see him. Say I am ill. Say anything; only let him know that he must go."

"Dear Vera, do open the door. Can I do anything for you? Are you really ill?"

"Yes, I am ill," said Vera in the same apathetic way. "But it does not signify—I shall be better when—when he is gone. Oh, make haste, make haste and tell him to go."

Mrs. Cradock did as she was bidden, and conveyed to Maurice's mind an impression of Vera's state, which made him seriously uneasy. He had no notion, however, that her illness was far more mental than physical. He left the house reluctantly, saying that he would call again, and leaving a large bouquet of sweet violets for Mademoiselle de Lusignan.

When he was gone, Vera rang the bell for a servant and ordered her to fetch a cab. Mrs. Cradock came in to expostulate and advise, but was silenced by the decision of her manner as well as shocked by the look of illness and sorrow upon her face.

"Drink something, dear, at least," she said, carrying a cup of tea into the room and setting it before the girl whom she loved with almost a mother's love. "You will be ill if you neither eat nor drink."

Vera carried the cup to her white lips and then put it down untasted. "I can't," she said faintly, "I can't swallow."

"My dear child, is your throat sore?"

"No," said Vera. "But I don't want anything."

"You will never be able to sing to-night," said Mrs. Cradock, almost wringing her hands with anxiety.

Vera made no answer as she fastened the warm furs round her neck. There were dark circles round her eyes, and a wild wan look upon her face. She looked already like a woman with a broken heart. But there was a decision in her movements which showed that some set purpose was actuating them.

She took a cab and drove with Janet, her maid, to Sir Adrian Longmore's house. Here she felt certain that she should obtain confirmation or disproof of Ilma's story.

But Sir Adrian and Frank Longmore were both out, and she could not wait. She had an engagement for that night.

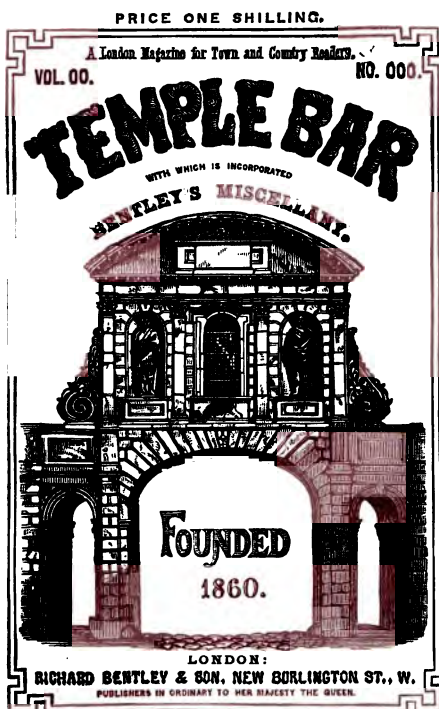
As she drove away from the Longmores' house she remembered various trifles that gave reason for belief in Ilma's story. She remembered the Countess' words to Frank Longmore in Madame Waldstein's garden, and Ilma's look of bitter enmity. She remembered that Maurice had spoken with agitation of the story of his life which he had not had courage to tell her at Mickleham. After all, there could be no mistake. She had loved and trusted blindly, and Maurice Guyon had abused her trust. She would never see him more.

END OF VOL. II.

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